

October 26, 2020

Dear PSP Staff, Parents & Caregivers,

The recent increase in COVID-19 cases serves as a reminder about how easily this virus can spread and about the importance of ongoing vigilance with our health and safety measures. I can’t thank you enough for the effort and flexibility you’ve shown, resulting in a great start to this school year, both in-person and online. We are not yet done with this virus and must continue to adhere to our safety plan to ensure the health of our school community. This includes daily health screening, masking, good hand hygiene practices, social distancing, and frequent cleaning.

As cases increase within our region and across the state, we are continuing to closely monitor the situation. Although we have had some positive cases that have resulted in additional students being quarantined as close contacts, overall our preventive measures appear to have helped us to slow transmission of the virus significantly within the school.

Many questions have surfaced as we have had to relay information to students and families about being quarantined as a result of being a close contact.  Below, please find a list of those frequently asked questions from both the Health Department of Northwest Michigan and our school system.

What are the criteria used to determine a close contact?

The Health Department considers a number of factors when determining the public health actions to take in response to school-associated COVID-19 cases. Please see the [school toolkit](http://track.spe.schoolmessenger.com/f/a/OJgywYGxttkR3YmU5uYwTg~~/AAAAAQA~/RgRheH9LP0RFaHR0cDovL253aGVhbHRoLm9yZy9wdWJzL1BhcmVudCUyMGFuZCUyMFRlYWNoZXIlMjBDT1ZJRCUyMFRvb2xraXQucGRmVwdzY2hvb2xtQgoAR8tLl1_ZW-cNUhdsZXdpcy5sYS55QG5vcnRobWVuLm9yZ1gEAAAAAQ~~) that describes these factors and considerations. Health Departments also rely on guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) when determining who is a close contact of a COVID-19 positive individual. The current [CDC guidelines](http://track.spe.schoolmessenger.com/f/a/eHvI2EHb4pMkucVzG7Qkqw~~/AAAAAQA~/RgRheH9LP0S8aHR0cHM6Ly9saW5rLnppeGNlbnRyYWwuY29tL3UvMmFkYjg4Yzkva0JnN1NuQVY2eEdlVlRuZDhJOUNfZz91PWh0dHBzJTNBJTJGJTJGd3d3LmNkYy5nb3YlMkZjb3JvbmF2aXJ1cyUyRjIwMTktbmNvdiUyRnBocCUyRmNvbnRhY3QtdHJhY2luZyUyRmNvbnRhY3QtdHJhY2luZy1wbGFuJTJGYXBwZW5kaXguaHRtbCUyM2NvbnRhY3RXB3NjaG9vbG1CCgBHy0uXX9lb5w1SF2xld2lzLmxhLnlAbm9ydGhtZW4ub3JnWAQAAAAB)  define a close contact as someone who was within 6 feet of an infected person for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period starting from 2 days before illness onset.

Additionally, through case investigation and contact tracing, more specific information is elicited that helps inform the health department and schools about the nature of contact as well as the duration of time a positive case was in the school during their infectious period.  This information may include:  what kind of interaction they had with others, the type of environment exposure took place in (indoor, outdoor, ventilation, room size, length of time the case spent in the room etc), and number of exposures (one-time event, multiple repeated days/events). This important process also helps to identify other close contacts outside of the school environment and individuals who may have symptoms of COVID 19.

Do I have to follow the quarantine protocol?

Yes. The school is provided the names of any students or staff members who have received instructions from the Health Department to quarantine as well as the date they are cleared to return.  Any student who has been instructed to quarantine will not be allowed to attend face-to-face instruction during their quarantine period and the school will work with staff, students and families to arrange virtual instruction. Any student who is sent to school while on quarantine will be sent home or remain in the school office and a parent/guardian will be called to pick up the student. Under the public health code, the local health department has the legal authority to enforce quarantine protocols.

Can I shorten the length of time my student must remain out of school/activities if my student gets a COVID-19 test?

No. You cannot test yourself out of quarantine. If you are under quarantine, a negative test does not end the 14 day quarantine period early. You can both come down with symptoms AND infect others during the entire two week period. Quarantine times are disease specific based upon infectious periods of the disease and transmission period. You must stay quarantined for the entire 14 day possible infectious period. Click [here](http://track.spe.schoolmessenger.com/f/a/NJqFnl4rKxmLLZ7KAOYoCg~~/AAAAAQA~/RgRheH9LP0SgaHR0cHM6Ly9saW5rLnppeGNlbnRyYWwuY29tL3UvZDVmMmFhOWQveUhvOFNuQVY2eEdlVlRuZDhJOUNfZz91PWh0dHBzJTNBJTJGJTJGd3d3LnRjYXBzLm5ldCUyRmRvd25sb2FkcyUyRmNvbW11bmljYXRpb25zX19tYXJrZXRpbmclMkZxdWFyYW50aW5lX2luZm9ybWF0aW9uLnBuZ1cHc2Nob29sbUIKAEfLS5df2VvnDVIXbGV3aXMubGEueUBub3J0aG1lbi5vcmdYBAAAAAE~) to view a Health Department infographic about quarantine.

If a student starts to have symptoms during quarantine what should we do?

Anyone with symptoms who is quarantined is encouraged to get tested for COVID-19. If in doubt, check with your child's primary care provider/doctor to be evaluated or call the Health Department at 1-800-432-4121 and ask for direction regarding testing.

The Health Department or MDHHS will be connecting with you daily to make sure that your child is doing well, and to check on symptom development. The health department works closely with MDHHS to provide this daily connection; you may notice the number shows up on your caller-ID as 1-866-80MDHHS. They will also offer you a text/email check-in option as well.

Why wear masks in the classroom if my student is still going to be quarantined?

Using a mask will help reduce the risk of getting COVID-19.  However, because the risk of transmission can’t be eliminated, it is the length of time that a student may be in contact with a COVID-19 positive case during their infectious period that determines whether or not a student is instructed by the Health Department to quarantine.

How does the school/school district work with the Health Department when determining a response to a school-associated COVID-19 positive case?

The school/school district provides information such as which students are enrolled in which class, who was present and when, where students were seated, for how long, etc. This information helps the Health Department determine potential close contacts. Once staff or students who have tested positive are contacted by the Health Department, a case investigation is completed with the goal of identifying close contacts who need to be quarantined.  The school/school district may also assist the Health Department in quickly notifying close contacts of their potential exposure once they are identified.

Why do the responses to cases within different schools appear to vary across the area or the state?

Each individual circumstance is different. There are details involved in each case investigation that represent private health information and can’t be shared.  It is difficult to fully understand the whole picture without all of the information, and therefore we discourage comparison between cases and responses.  Local health departments are happy to share information about the typical process of case investigation and contact tracing but encourage everyone to remember that we may not be able to share the complete picture.

The decision to quarantine an individual or a classroom/school is made to contain transmission and is not taken lightly. School and public health officials discuss each circumstance thoroughly before a decision is made and oftentimes, scenarios may be very complex. Schools may also close due to other factors including inadequate staff and resources to continue in person instruction or high levels of community transmission.

How are quarantine dates determined?

Quarantine is determined by the last date of close contact to the confirmed positive COVID-19 case. Often information at the beginning of a case investigation is limited and as the investigation unfolds there can be corrections to quarantine dates. If there is a change in the length of quarantine individuals will be notified directly by the health department of the change and reason for the change. In addition, if an individual in quarantine starts showing symptoms of COVID-19, their quarantine may be extended until COVID-19 is ruled out.  They may also be designated a “probable” case which means that their close contacts need to be traced and quarantined as well.

Why can’t my child just Zoom into daily classes if she/he is in quarantine?

There are many factors that make “Zooming” into daily instruction a challenge.  While we have grown by leaps and bounds this year in terms of technological prowess, the fact remains that pulling off high quality live instruction while simultaneously facilitating discussion and learning on Zoom is challenging at best.  There are issues with video quality, audio, document cameras, drivers, software, and teacher preparation time to simultaneously offer both types of instruction.  While some of our staff members have made this option available to students, we’re just not ready as a system to offer this at scale.

Why can’t my student who is quarantined just join in one of the online classes?

Classes were set for the online program through a survey and registration process at the beginning of the year.  Online teachers are working hard to maintain a virtual classroom community, which could be disrupted with the sudden influx of new students who would leave again at the end of their quarantine period.  For now, quarantined students joining an existing online classroom does not appear like a viable option for us.

So, where CAN I get help for my student who is quarantined?

Quarantined students will be able to access instruction via the learning management system.  Principals will be providing parents and students with information on how to access teacher support and will make every effort to ensure students have the support they need during the days they are under quarantine. This support may differ from building to building. Principals will communicate the specific supports and plans from their building directly to parents.

Thank you for your ongoing support and flexibility. If you have further questions, please contact your school office.  Stay safe and stay healthy!

Respectfully,

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