

September 29, 2020

## Background

Earlier this summer, the Rural Association of Northern California Health Officers (RANCHO) discussed ways that we could assist local school districts within our jurisdictions in their planning efforts for this fall with respect to the COVID-19 epidemic. We recognized that our region of the state has unique issues and challenges for in person instruction of school age children, and we hoped to offer a concise statement tailored to those needs. One of the recurring themes for school planners was the difficulty of expanding spaces for learning, in an environment that is usually not favorable for expansion. Many of our counties are relatively economically challenged, and district facilities are often aging and have less than ideal space in classrooms in normal times. We also live in a region where weather, for much of the school year, is not suitable for conducting typical classes outdoors.

Recognizing these facts and drawing on expert discussions at several levels, including the position statement on schools from the American Academy of Pediatrics, we agreed that the recommended 6 feet of distance was ideal and preferred yet may not be realistically possible in many instances. We agreed that providing a more flexible range of distance by age/grade, *while concurrently emphasizing measures such as cohorted classroom groups and careful use of face coverings when appropriate*, was an alternative that would be useful and practical. We described an acceptable range of “ideally 6 feet, and a minimum of 3 feet.” Our document was jointly signed and presented to the California Department of Public Health (CDPH). We also circulated copies among our local school district partners.

Since releasing the RANCHO school consensus document, CDPH guidance for schools was published. The RANCHO opinion remains a resource to schools to fill in gaps not covered by the state guidance. Of note, CDPH guidance includes a 6-foot minimum as “practicable” (*in combination* with cleaning, cohorting, masking, enhanced ventilation and filtering, physical barriers, etc) and subsequent CDPH technical input to counties has concurred with the 3-foot minimum.

We wish to emphasize the importance of seeking the goal of maximal space and minimal mixing between students, and strongly urge age appropriate learning models that enable a better use of space to achieve the goal distance between students of at least 6 feet at all reasonable times.

## **Consensus Requirements for Schools**

**Updated July 23, 2020**

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### **Guiding principles:**

- The overarching goal is to maximize the many benefits of in-person instruction while taking steps, based on current knowledge, to protect the health and safety of the students, school staff and the community.
- Strategies must be flexible and adaptable in order to be feasible across diverse rural communities and sustainable as our knowledge of SARS-CoV-2 evolves and the level of local disease transmission changes over time.
- Though perspectives vary and solutions are imperfect and present challenges, we share the common goal of supporting our children to thrive.

**Current Context:** 1) Rising COVID-19 disease transmission across Northern California, and, 2) the June 18 statewide requirement for Californians over the age of 2 to wear face coverings when in higher-risk situations. Details are subject to change based on new information and changes to state requirements.

**The RANCHO provide the following specific consensus requirements for schools which are aligned with CDPH and AAP guidance for schools:**

1. Health Screenings – Daily symptom and COVID-19 exposure screening of students and staff, with the option to screen at home or onsite based on local resources and plans. No mandatory temperature screening. Actively direct students and staff to stay home if ill.
2. Social distancing prevention strategies by age group – on a spectrum, emphasizing stable cohorting for elementary students (less feasible to physically distance and consistently use face coverings) and physical distancing plus face coverings for middle/junior high/high school students (less feasible to cohort).



Figure courtesy of Santa Clara County Public Health.

Elementary schools:

- Stable classroom cohorts (up to standard class size at each respective grade level) are maintained throughout each school day, and through each quarter or semester, with an assigned primary cohort teacher.
- No mixing across stable classroom cohorts.

Middle schools/junior high/high schools:

- Spacing of student desks is maximized.
- Stable classroom cohorts are encouraged (e.g. middle school) if feasible.
- Larger cohorts of more than one classroom may be arranged while avoiding school-wide mixing of students and staff.

All schools:

- Class size is minimized as much as practicable and space between seating and desks is maximized, ideally 6 feet and a minimum of 3 feet.
- Distance teacher and staff desks at least six feet away from students to minimize adult-to-child disease transmission.
- Assign stable seating arrangements and document attendance for students and adults to ensure close contacts within classrooms are minimized and easily identifiable.

3. Face coverings or face shields are required, as follows, unless exempted.

**Teachers and staff** - All adults must wear a cloth face covering or face shield at all times while on campus, except while eating or drinking. Teachers may wear a face shield during instruction but must return to wearing a face covering outside the classroom.

**Students** - In view of the state mandate above regarding face coverings for those over 2 years of age, the use of facial coverings for all students is recommended and may be required by local public health officials.

**As a group, we endorse, at a minimum, the following:**

- All students** (TK through 12th grade) are required to wear cloth face coverings:
- while arriving and departing from school campus;
  - in any area outside of the classroom (except when eating, drinking, or engaging in physical activity);
  - while waiting for or riding on a school bus.

*In the classroom:*

**TK through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students** should be encouraged to wear a cloth face covering, including within their stable classroom cohort, and especially if unable to cohort or physically distance in the classroom. A face shield is an acceptable alternative for children in this age group who cannot wear a face covering.

**3<sup>rd</sup> grade through high school students** must use cloth face coverings when in the classroom even if they are in a stable classroom cohort.

**Individuals exempted** from face covering requirements include:

(1) anyone who has trouble breathing, is exercising, or is unconscious, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to remove the covering without assistance (2) students with special needs who are unable to tolerate a face covering or with developmental, behavioral or medical contraindications and (3) staff that require respiratory protection according to Cal/OSHA standards.

Note: Face shields alone do not perform as well as masks to prevent droplet transmission. Use of a face shield with a drape may provide additional protection.

4. Bus transportation

- Ensure at least six feet of distance between the bus driver and students when seated
- Bus drivers and students must wear face coverings at all times while awaiting and riding on buses.
- Maximize physical distancing between students on the bus by limiting available seats as practicable and no more than 2 students per seat.
- Assign seating; if possible, assign seats by cohort. Students from same family should sit together.
- Open windows for increased circulation as weather allows.

5. Intensified cleaning and disinfecting by staff using EPA approved List “N” products for COVID-19, preferably the less toxic safer products per the Responsible Purchasing Network (see AAP and CDPH guidance)

*Local Public Health is available to consult with schools for technical assistance and feedback during the planning process; plan approval is not required. Public Health may ask to review school plans as questions arise.*