

4th SOP of the 2021-2022 School Year

The Maine Department of Education (DOE) highlighted changes that are included in the new Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) release in late December. One caveat to note is that if a school district is enforcing universal masking then no person will be asked to quarantine as a close contact unless they test positive or are symptomatic. Keep this in mind as you look through the information below. The information in the boxes is from me attempting to further detail/clarify the bulleted point directly above, which is from the DOE. I hope to bring some clarity about where we're at with new rules as well as a sprinkle of common sense and caution moving into this new phase of dealing and living with and through this pandemic in the Brewer School Department.

- Isolation and quarantine periods for students and staff are shortened consistent with recently updated guidance from the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC),

Quarantines have been reduced to 5 days when someone tests positive, but when a quarantined person returns they are also required to wear a mask for a 10 day period.

- The Maine CDC is aligning its definition of what constitutes a COVID-19 outbreak in schools with the State's longstanding definition of an outbreak of other infectious diseases in schools. Effective immediately, the Maine CDC will open an outbreak investigation if a school reports that more than 15 percent of a school population is absent, which is the standard currently utilized to define an outbreak from other infectious diseases, such as influenza.

This is a significant change from the previous criteria for being considered a school that was technically in an outbreak. It also moves in a direction of normalizing how COVID-19 is dealt with, bringing it into alignment with how other infectious diseases are addressed.

- The Maine CDC will no longer consider exposure to COVID-19 in an outdoor setting or on a school bus (where the Federal government requires masks be worn) as a "close contact."

Due to federal transportation rules, no school district in the country was ever allowed to remove the requirement for masks to be worn on buses. With the importance of mask wearing being elevated as a key mitigation strategy in this new SOP, it de facto made school buses locations where students (and adults) would no longer be considered a close contact. This means, essentially, that there will be no contact tracing on buses. The same is now true for any outside activities as there is no research to support that COVID-19 is spread in most outside venues.

- The Maine CDC is updating its “test to stay” pooled testing program to enable more students to stay in the classroom. Previously, students and staff participating in pooled testing who were exposed to COVID-19 outside of a school setting were required to quarantine and not attend school. If they were exposed to COVID-19 in a school setting and participating in pooled testing, then they were not required to quarantine from school. Now, regardless of where the exposure occurs, if a student or staff member is participating in pooled testing, then they will not be required to quarantine from school.

This is a change that will relieve many families who have been frustrated that the protection from quarantining that pooled testing brought was only the case when a student was a close contact at school. If they were a close contact in a community location, the pooled testing did not, in the past, protect them from quarantine. Now it does, as does practicing universal masking in a school district.

There has been a good deal of discussion about what “test-to-stay” really entails. The new SOP skirts this issue, in terms of clearly defining how such a program would work. It appears that the Maine CDC looks at pooled testing, which we already have, as a type of test-to-stay program. Hopefully the new iteration of this SOP in a few weeks will further clarify the options and uses of test-to-stay. The School Department does have Binex tests and can use those at other times outside of pooled testing on a case by case basis to help verify whether a student is positive.

One should note that in the new SOP, if someone is vaccinated but six months beyond their final vaccine shot and they are not boosted then the person **is** required to quarantine as a close contact *unless their school district is practicing universal masking. If this is the case then a person wouldn't be required to quarantine as a close contact, anyways.* No 16 or 17 year old students would fall into this category per the new rule. (Yes, the rules here get confusing. But please note here that, without officially changing the definition of what being vaccinated means, these rules essentially create a new level of importance when it comes to being boosted.)

No agency has commented on whether having student athletes unmasked while physically participating in their sport during a competition, and students unmasked while performing in the arts during a show, would mean that a district is not enforcing universal masking. For now our assumption is that the Brewer School Department is a universally masked district, while the above examples are happening. Our students in these activities are vaccinated or they are regularly tested for COVID-19, and to this point in time our co/extracurriculars have not experienced any more positive cases than the general student population. If the Maine CDC or Maine DOE find that a district does not qualify as universally masking if students are unmasked during these activities then the Brewer School Department will assess next steps at that time and communicate with all of you.

For now, there will be situations – such as when a student lives in a household where others are positive – where the School Department will look to work with families to either have students stay home to make sure they are healthy and/or regularly test the students if they are at school in order to limit exposure for others. This is part of working to keep our schools open and everyone healthy. We hope there is updated, better guidance on these kinds of scenarios when this SOP is rewritten again in a few weeks.