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**MEDIA RELEASE: Mills Administration Releases Guidance to Assist Schools with Fall Plans**

***Health Advisory System reflects relative risk by county, updated requirements to safely reopen schools promote public health***

AUGUSTA — The Mills Administration today released updated guidance to assist school communities in making their decisions about how to resume instruction this fall in the face of COVID-19.  This guidance includes the Health Advisory System that classifies counties’ relative risk by color as well as updated requirements for schools to reopen safely.

The Health Advisory System is a collaboration among the Maine Department of Education (DOE), the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC). The [previously announced](https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fmaine.us2.list-manage.com%2Ftrack%2Fclick%3Fu%3Da582edd6473e477ef6307c769%26id%3Db30899cb72%26e%3D4f16ec1299&data=02%7C01%7Crachel.paling%40maine.gov%7C558d5a4049cd461e693a08d8356bb905%7C413fa8ab207d4b629bcdea1a8f2f864e%7C0%7C0%7C637318084092910628&sdata=ebKx9Mwl%2Frfdj51K5%2FrP7SM75ZknD17WOgyVbFKrQDI%3D&reserved=0) classifications were developed to categorize counties based on quantitative and qualitative data about COVID-19 including, but not limited to, recent data on case rates, positivity rates, and syndromic data (e.g., symptoms of influenza or COVID-19). This system categorizes counties by three-color based designations: red, yellow, and green.

The initial assessment released today showed that 16 Maine counties are currently categorized as “green,” suggesting a relatively low COVID-19 risk at this time and that in-person instruction can be adopted as long as schools can implement the six Requirements for Safely Opening Schools in the Fall. While COVID-19 remains more prevalent in Cumberland, York, Androscoggin, and Sagadahoc counties than in other Maine counties, the assessment pertains to the unique circumstances of schools and currently indicates relatively limited risk statewide. All counties, like the state as a whole, have COVID-19 prevalence below that of virtually all other states.

Circumstances could change between now and the official start of the school year. The Health Advisory System reflects ongoing analysis of evolving data. It will be updated every two weeks, serving as one piece of information that school and district leaders can use to make decisions about how to deliver education this fall.

“Today, we are providing additional guidance to school districts as they decide how to proceed with the school year,” said Maine DOE Commissioner Pender Makin. “While I’m grateful to know that our state continues to be relatively safe due to the vigilance of Maine people, this risk evaluation is intended to be, and should be, just one of several variables that local school districts take into consideration as they make decisions that are best for their communities. We anticipate that in many cases schools in low risk areas will open this fall using a hybrid learning model in order to best protect the healthy and safety of their students and provide them with the most effective education possible. It is our goal to support them through this challenging time.”

The Requirements for Safely Opening Schools in the fall are required by all schools if they decide to return to in-classroom instruction, regardless of their county’s red, yellow, or green designation to protect the safety and well-being of staff, students, and families. They fall into six categories:

1. Symptom Screenings Before Coming to School
2. Physical distancing and school facilities
3. Masks/Face Coverings
4. Hand Hygiene
5. Personal Protective Equipment
6. Return to School After Illness

A school administrative unit (SAU) may opt for hybrid instruction if its buildings or readiness make adhering to these requirements a challenge.

Maine DOE has updated the requirements based on further analysis and public feedback to its Framework for Returning to Classroom Instruction. This includes changing the requirement to wear face coverings to a recommendation for children ages 2 to 4, when developmentally appropriate. This reflects feedback provided by experts and aligns school and child care guidance. It also adds recommendations on school activities like music classes.

Governor Mills [announced](https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fmaine.us2.list-manage.com%2Ftrack%2Fclick%3Fu%3Da582edd6473e477ef6307c769%26id%3Df5ce9db705%26e%3D4f16ec1299&data=02%7C01%7Crachel.paling%40maine.gov%7C558d5a4049cd461e693a08d8356bb905%7C413fa8ab207d4b629bcdea1a8f2f864e%7C0%7C0%7C637318084092910628&sdata=V7PLA5GwTaDYX7tAXX%2Feo%2BYDpE7Q5CQZlQmdJXzSrBE%3D&reserved=0) on July 17 that these science-based health and safety requirements, which follow national best practices, will be financially supported by up to $165 million in Federal CARES Act funding to be distributed to school systems across Maine. The Mills Administration views the funding as an important initial investment to help schools prepare for in-classroom instruction but recognizes that more funding is necessary for ongoing operations. The Administration is hopeful that Congress will provide greater aid to Maine school systems in the coming weeks and months.

“The dedication and diligence of Maine people have kept the state’s COVID-19 infection rates relatively low,” **said DHHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew**. “While today’s assessment reflects that, we continue to urge continued vigilance as we approach the fall.”

“These designations are a tool for local school communities to use as they prepare for the coming academic year,” **said Dr. Nirav D. Shah, Director of the Maine CDC**. “They’ll be updated every two weeks based on the latest Maine CDC data analysis and information from medical providers throughout the state.”

The Health Advisory System categorizations are defined as follows:

* **RED:** Categorization as “red” suggests that the county has a high risk of COVID-19 spread and that in-person instruction is not advisable.
* **YELLOW:** Categorization as “yellow” suggests that that the county has an elevated risk of COVID-19 spread and that schools may consider hybrid instructional models as a way to reduce the number of people in schools and classrooms at any one time.
* **GREEN:** Categorization as “green” suggests that the county has a relatively low risk of COVID-19 spread and that schools may consider in-person instruction, as long as they are able to implement the required health and safety measures.  Schools in a “green” county may need to use hybrid instruction models if there is insufficient capacity or other factors (facilities, staffing, geography/transportation, etc.) that may prevent full implementation of the health and safety requirements.

Given the large and varied nature of counties in Maine, SAUs within a county or spread across multiple counties may adopt a reopening policy that differs from this county-based categorization of COVID-19 risk.  The Health Advisory System can be found on the Maine DOE website in Part I of the Framework for Returning to Classroom Instruction: [https://www.maine.gov/doe/framework/part-I/#risk](https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fmaine.us2.list-manage.com%2Ftrack%2Fclick%3Fu%3Da582edd6473e477ef6307c769%26id%3D4db3ce07ca%26e%3D4f16ec1299&data=02%7C01%7Crachel.paling%40maine.gov%7C558d5a4049cd461e693a08d8356bb905%7C413fa8ab207d4b629bcdea1a8f2f864e%7C0%7C0%7C637318084092920620&sdata=3WifCNEMNkUN1YSPdRoWz2UK8x7c%2FHtX0%2BhMkcoZiTE%3D&reserved=0)

While the county categorizations apply only to schools, Maine DHHS has also updated its guidance for licensed child care providers to align with the Requirements for Safely Reopening Schools. The DHHS Office of Child and Family Services is sharing this updated guidance with licensed child care providers throughout Maine and supporting their efforts to protect the health and safety of their staff and the children and families they serve.