

Diocese of New Ulm 2021-22 Return to Schools Guidance

August 4, 2021



In His Easter homily, Pope Francis offered a message of hope and new beginnings that speaks to us now as we prepare for a new academic year, “In these dark months of the pandemic, let us listen to the risen Lord as he invites us to begin anew and never lose hope. It is always possible to begin anew, because there is a new life that God can awaken in us in spite of all our failures.” The schools of the Diocese of New Ulm live in a world of hope every September as we joyfully anticipate the new academic year. This year is no different.

On July 28, 2021 the MN Department of Health provided recommendations for return to school protocols based on the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) latest guidance. Taking the needs of our schools and families, these documents, and the wealth of educational and personal experience in coping with a world-wide pandemic over the past 18 months, we have designed a collaborative plan for the schools of the Diocese of New Ulm.

As Catholic schools, we take seriously the responsibility to develop the whole child: physically, emotionally, spiritually, and academically. The last year has forced us to make the physical needs of our children the highest priority, arguably to the detriment of other aspects. While maintaining high levels of physical safety will always be a priority, we recognize the students’ need to return to the classroom the highest level of normalcy possible while maintaining their safety and health.

The plan that follows is based on current needs and data. Guidance may be modified as needed and communicated to school communities in the months ahead. At a minimum, and absent any legal mandates from the State of MN for nonpublic schools, all Catholic schools in the Diocese of New Ulm will implement the following strategies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 during the 2021-2022 academic year.

Cleaning/Disinfecting

Schools will establish a plan for cleaning and disinfecting and provide the needed supplies.

Contact Tracing

It is still mandatory to report confirmed COVID cases per MN Rule 4605.7070, “any person in charge of any institution, school, child care facility, or camp to report cases of COVID-19 to the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH).” The responsibility for contact tracing lies with trained

professionals at Minnesota Department of Health. Catholic schools should assist MDH by providing relevant information when requested.

Communication to Parents Regarding Exposure to Infectious Disease

When students are potentially exposed to any infectious disease (including but not limited to COVID-19) at school, school leaders will notify parents following their infectious disease notification policy. At a minimum, schools should provide families with a communicable disease fact sheet.

Curriculum Planning

The focus of our schools has always been, and continues to be, excellence in every area. We will therefore continue in-person instruction and return to practices that include classroom collaboration among students and teachers.

Drinking Fountains

Students are always encouraged to bring a water bottle to use throughout the school day. Drinking fountains will be opened and available for student use.

Facility Ventilation

In many schools, new ventilation systems were acquired during the pandemic. These are still beneficial and their use is encouraged.

Hand Sanitizing

Hand sanitizer stations will be available in schools, while students will be further encouraged to wash their hands with soap and water. Students will be instructed in the practices of good hygiene.

Illness

We are asking parents to be honest and vigilant about their children's health and are depending on them to help make common sense decisions regarding their children's health. Students and employees are expected to remain at home when they are sick. Schools will promptly send children and employees home when they display symptoms of COVID-19 illness. Parents are expected to monitor health concerns at home.

In determining when students may return to school after an illness, schools will follow their standard illness exclusion policy (e.g. fever-free for 24 hours without fever-reducing medication) unless a student has a lab-confirmed case of COVID-19.

Students with lab-confirmed cases of COVID-19 are allowed to return to school when all of the following are true (Minnesota Department of Health, 2021):

- They feel better. Their cough, shortness of breath, or other symptoms have substantially improved;
- It has been at least 10 days since they first felt sick or tested positive;
- They have had no fever for at least 24 hours, without using medicine that lowers fevers.

Employees will follow a similar policy.

Liturgical Celebrations

It is of the utmost importance that our Catholic Identity remain alive and well in our various liturgical celebrations. Schools will follow the most current protocols outlined by the Diocese of New Ulm regarding liturgy.

- Families and guests are encouraged to be a part of liturgical celebrations.
- There are no capacity limits in church buildings.
- Presently Communion will be distributed under one form.
- Holy water may be used.
- The Offertory Procession is as usual.
- The Sign of Peace may be used at the pastor's discretion.

Masks

The State's legal mandate requiring face coverings in public and nonpublic schools expired at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. The Diocese of New Ulm does not require Catholic school students or employees to wear face coverings. Parents and guardians are well-positioned to determine if their child should wear a face covering while outside of the home and out in the community. No student will be prevented from wearing a face covering. Catholic schools will work to reduce any stigmatization associated with the decision to wear or not wear a face covering. We will continue to foster communities of respect and kindness, whether masked or unmasked

Masking is still required on all school buses. This is a federal requirement as school buses (both public and private) are considered public transportation.

Pandemic Preparedness Plan

Schools should minimize changes to the in-person learning model for individual students, classrooms, and schools. Schools should only utilize the distance learning model when they have been advised by a competent public health authority to temporarily close a school building or classroom due to concerns about the spread of an infectious disease.

Should the need arise once again to tighten structures to prevent the spread of illness, the school should have an established plan.

Physical Distancing

Physical distancing of 3 feet is recommended by the CDC when and where possible. Small group interaction is an important part of the educational and social experience of our students and will be permitted. Schools should promote public health recommendations for physical distancing provided they do not: 1) disproportionately impact child development or the educational goals of the schools or 2) limit the school's ability to offer in-person learning to all of its students.

Quarantines

Minnesota Department of Health no longer requires school leaders to quarantine individuals, entire classrooms, or groups of students on account of potential exposure to COVID19.

Screening for Symptoms

We recognize the important role our parents play in all things, but especially in all things COVID-related. Parents will be expected to monitor their children for symptoms and keep them home if more than one of the following symptoms is evidenced. Symptoms include:

- Fever of 100.4 degrees F or higher
- New or worsening cough
- Difficulty breathing/hard time breathing
- Loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Chills
- Muscle pain
- Extreme fatigue
- Severe headache
- New nasal congestion or runny nose

Specialist Instruction

Students may travel in and out of specialist classrooms for instruction.

Temperature Checks

Schools will not need to administer temperature checks. Parents should monitor for fevers at home.

Visitors

We recognize the important role families and volunteers play in our school communities. The buildings will be open for visitors, and volunteers are encouraged to participate. All visitors and vendors will need to self-screen upon entry.

This plan was created based on the current situation, and it is imperative that schools and families remain flexible in the months ahead. There may come a time when the need to pivot to a new set of guidelines will arise. At that time, we will re-evaluate and use the most current data to modify this plan. The 2020-2021 academic year was proof that our schools are capable of doing great things with flexibility and grace, and we hope the next year will be even smoother.

We move forward in joyful hope, knowing that brighter days lie ahead. Thanks to all who continue to go the extra mile to live out our mission to be the loving face of Christ to each and every person in our communities. Pray for each other.