



Frequently asked questions

January 12, 2021

Why is it now acceptable to bring back elementary students full-time and in person, when the original guidance was focused on case counts? What changed?

We **are not** health professionals. As school officials, we are provided guidance by health professionals and then are expected to listen to and follow that guidance. Effective with the Governor's announcement last month, health experts have now taken the position that elementary-aged students do not contract nor transmit COVID at the rates originally believed and that it is safe to bring them back into our schools. State health officials have concluded that elementary students are less susceptible to serious complications from COVID-19 and that schools have learned more about how to reduce the potential for spread in schools. The Minnesota Department of Education has been intentional in including health experts on calls with state superintendents and now has clearly set an expectation that elementary students should return to schools full-time and in person, which is why we are seeing this happen across the metro. Of course, we will stay in close contact with state and local health officials in the event guidance changes, once again.

Why are only K-3 students returning to the classroom and not all elementary students at the same time?

The state has directed school districts to use what they are calling a "rolling start" for the return of students. They have set a limit of no more than three grade levels per school returning at the same time. Because our Kindergarten students are in their own schools at the kindergarten centers, we are able to bring back grades 1-3 in the other elementary schools at the same time. Additional grade levels are required to wait two weeks as part of the "rolling start" before they are allowed to return to school. In our case, that means that grades 4 and 5 can return in person on Monday, February 8. In the meantime, those grade levels will remain in distance learning.

Why is blended learning (hybrid) not an option for elementary students?

State officials set a new expectation that elementary students should return to school full-time and in person. Once that expectation was set, the blended learning model (50% capacity) can't be maintained. As soon as we return full grade levels of students to our buildings we move past the 50% threshold. Our current return rate will be approximately 68%. That's definitely more than 50%, but less than 100% if all students were returning.

Why won't students return on January 19, the earliest allowable date?

At Mounds View, we made a commitment to allow families to request a learning model change at the end of the first semester, January 27. Rather than move students based on their current learning model and then ask for changes at the end of the semester, we felt it made more sense to honor all change requests at this time as we transition to in-person learning. In addition, we have made a commitment that we will allow families not requesting a model change to remain with their current teacher wherever possible. Accommodating this takes considerable time and coordination as students need to be moved between the learning models.

What will school look like when all students return?

Schools will send more specific information in the coming days to kindergarten and elementary school parents. This will include information and protocols around classroom learning, transportation, food-service and other operations. Our staff are currently working to find new placements for students who were previously in distance learning and now want to attend in person, as well as for those students previously in blended (hybrid) learning now opting to move to distance learning. All of our elementary schools are making every effort to keep students with their current teacher.

What about secondary students? When will they be able to return?

The state has been very clear that they expect school districts to continue to follow the original guidance provided in the Minnesota Safe Learning Plan. That means we will still be paying close attention to the community case counts. At the secondary level, case rates need to be under 30 cases per 10,000 residents for schools to return to blended learning. Case counts are down considerably from where they were in late November and early December, but we don't know exactly when they will move below 30. We will be watching this closely and will communicate with staff, students and parents when we see things trending down where we believe we will be allowed to return to school. Obviously, we will also stay in close communication with state officials and our regional support team in the event guidance changes, like it did for the elementary schools. As soon as we have this clarity, we will share this information with all families.

What do we know about COVID testing and vaccines?

As you may be aware, the state is assisting school districts in setting up COVID testing for staff that will be available every two weeks. This testing will be directed toward staff who are returning to work with students in person. Testing dates are assigned by the state, so we really don't have flexibility. Staff could test at other locations, but to test on site we have to administer the tests on the date assigned. Our first testing date is scheduled for January 25 and aligns with the return of our elementary students. When it comes to vaccines, we have been told we are still a few weeks away from having vaccines available for staff. Vaccines are being distributed by the county, and educators have been assigned to group 1B - right behind first responders and medical personnel who are group 1A. One thing to note is that the number of people in group 1A - by county - has a direct impact on how quickly vaccines are available for group 1B in that county.

Why might other districts get the vaccine sooner than us? Is there not enough vaccine?

It is not about the availability of the vaccine as much as it is about the rate of vaccinations. Because Ramsey County has more medical personnel and first responders than some other counties, it takes more time to go through them before educators reach the front of the line. So, it is likely that educators in counties with fewer people in group 1A may make it to the front of their line and get vaccinated before those in Ramsey County.

Is there any way to accelerate this process?

We have been trying. We are advocating with state health officials as well as our local legislators to prioritize educators, regardless of county, to get them vaccinated. We will continue our efforts and report back what we learn in the coming days. We are optimistic that things are evolving with the vaccination plans and that educators will soon have access to their first dose of the vaccine.

Are the days we have missed for COVID like snow days requiring us to extend the school year calendar into summer?

The state has been clear that extending the school year is not required. The planning days and other days off as learning models have needed to be shifted will not be counted against the traditional calendar. School districts do not have to extend their year into the summer.

Because of the days students have missed could the District offer some additional summer learning opportunities?

While there is no requirement to extend the school year, for those students and families who may be interested in additional academic support we will be looking for opportunities during the summer. These opportunities will be optional, age-appropriate and come from any number of sources including traditional summer school, enrichment and community education.