

My kids were exposed to COVID. Am I supposed to keep them home from school?

By [Steven Rodas | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)



First day of school at Livingston Elementary School for pre-K to 4th grade students in Union. The school has shifted to remote instruction due to rising case figures. Wednesday, September 8, 2021. Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

The return from winter break has been complicated for New Jersey parents by [the growing omicron wave](#), which begs — among [other questions](#) — should I keep my child at home if he or she is exposed to COVID?

The answer, as it stands, depends on a few factors.

While Newark, the state's largest school district of about 40,000 students, [has shifted to remote instruction](#), Superintendent Roger León said guidelines surrounding COVID exposures remain critical.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an exposure or ["close contact" is defined](#) as being less than 6 feet from a person with COVID for at least 15 minutes over a 24-hour period.

Although COVID vaccines have been available for adults for over a year, 5-11 year olds only [recently became eligible](#) for inoculations. Health officials have continued to warn of younger individuals being carriers for the virus while simultaneously asymptomatic, making protocols surrounding exposure vital.

León said a confirmed positive case does not necessarily mean the student must quarantine at home — even if the close contact is a sibling.

“Monitoring the child’s symptoms becomes extremely important ... but we allow the vaccinated (and asymptomatic) student nonetheless to be back in school as opposed to being quarantined,” said León.

Reporting the case to school staff and by extension the county health department is still imperative, he said.

“We would want to know if they came in contact with other students for example,” León added. “There’s also the contact tracing component. If the child is back in school, we’d advise parents to also monitor any changes for identifiable symptoms that are associated with the virus, and we’d want them to re-test if those things appear.”

The New Jersey Department of Health guidelines, [last updated Dec. 15](#), state that a student must stay home if they are sick with COVID or are not fully vaccinated and have been in close contact with someone with COVID in the past 14 days. However, students not showing symptoms and fully vaccinated do not need to quarantine, state officials say in the guidelines.

Still, those students must do the following, according to health officials:

- Get tested 5-7 days following an exposure to someone with COVID
- Monitor for symptoms of COVID for 14 days following an exposure
- Wear a mask in other indoor public settings for 14 days or until they

receive a negative test result



First-grade students line up inside the cafeteria for lunch at School 11 in Jersey City, on Thursday, Dec. 9, 2021.

Reena Rose Sibayan | The Jersey Journal

Following the holiday week, Gov. Phil Murphy is seeking to extend [the mask mandate](#) in schools. When asked about the possibility of shuttering in-person classes Monday, he reiterated that state officials, "will do everything we can to keep our kids in school."

The CDC is expected to release new K-12 quarantine and isolation guidance, however schools should follow current regulations, state Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli said during Murphy's coronavirus press briefing from Trenton.

New Jersey's seven-day average for new confirmed positive tests increased to 23,391 on Monday, up 91% from a week ago and 836% from a month ago. It's the highest average the state has recorded since the pandemic began.

Positive cases continue to rise among school staff and students in New Jersey, according to [numbers released before schools went on winter break](#) that track infections regardless of where the transmission occurred.

For the week ending Dec. 26, with 28.8% of schools reporting data (down from 61%), 7,125 confirmed cases were reported among staff (1,973) and

students (5,152).

In Newark, León said an omicron surge has presented challenges, with 750 cases recorded from the resumption of in-person classes last July up to December.

Other school districts across the state also sent guidance to parents following the winter break — a time that saw [an explosion of post-Christmas](#) case counts last year.

The [Berkeley Township School District reminded parents](#) Saturday to contact school principals as soon as a household member tested positive for COVID. Runnemede [school officials asked parents to](#) screen children daily and only send them into school if they test negative for the virus. The Henry Hudson Tri-District, which includes the Atlantic Highlands, Highlands, and Henry Hudson Regional school districts, [told parents that it would](#) take further steps to limit opportunities for students to mix.

In a letter sent New Year's Eve, the Haddonfield School District said that while the isolation period for someone positive for COVID [was recently cut in half by the CDC](#) those rules do not apply to K-12 schools.

"Therefore, until CDC updates school-specific guidance, it is recommended that K-12 schools continue to follow conventional isolation and quarantine timeframes (of a ten-day quarantine or a 7-day quarantine combined with testing and a negative test result)," Superintendent Charles Klaus and Assistant Superintendent Gino Priolo said in a joint letter.



Hedgepeth-Williams School for the Arts in Trenton, Monday, May 3, 2021. Pictured: 6th grader Ciemere Bolden works in Math class behind a plexiglass shield. Michael Mancuso | NJ Advance MediaMichael Mancuso | NJ Advance Med

Scott Taylor, Union superintendent, said the township's 7,300-student district requires, "a 10-day quarantine period, unless by Day 8, the individual — who is exposed — tests negative.

"That's using a PCR COVID test, not a rapid antigen test," he added.

Taylor said [a "test to stay" program](#), which the state provided guidance to schools over Saturday, could be a boon for keeping students in classrooms. These programs allow students who were in "close contact" with someone who tested positive to take rapid COVID tests over several days at school before entering the classroom. If they test negative, they can stay in school and do not need to quarantine.

Schools [can now register](#) for the program as long as they, "have robust contact tracing in place and access to testing resources," the interim guidelines say.

"Students participating in 'test to stay day' are required to comply with enhanced testing and masking recommendations and should quarantine when not in school," Persichilli said during Monday's briefing. Officials noted in the guidelines that more information will be made available during the

“test to stay” program rollout.

Taylor said that of the ten schools in his district at least two have been on either half-day or complete shutdowns due to COVID every week since Nov. 29. Thus, he is wary of installing the programs without access to additional resources — such as tests.

“I’m somewhat frustrated that school districts would be given this opportunity but not also provided the financing or the human resource support staff to effectively implement what could be a great tool to keep kids in school,” he said.

In Jersey City, Deputy Superintendent Norma Fernandez said fully vaccinated students who were exposed to a positive case but do not show symptoms are not required to get tested. Getting a test, [which has become harder to do](#) over the last few weeks, is only necessary when students present symptoms.

“Vaccinated students who were exposed (also) do not to be quarantined but they must wear a mask, which we are already doing and be monitored for symptoms,” Fernandez said.

The district, which includes about 29,000 students, has taken a “significant” hit amid the omicron wave, Fernandez said. She estimated that about 80% of staff are fully vaccinated, but that hasn’t stopped the pandemic from impacting the school year.

“We had close to 600 staff members call out sick Monday,” she said. “I don’t think all diagnosed with COVID, but it’s part of why we had to go remote. There were just not enough staff on hand to supervise the students.”

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