

As N.J. schools switch to 3-foot rule, here's what in-person instruction looks like

By [Josh Axelrod | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

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Pre-K student Annalyisa Flores raises her hand to answer her question at Irving School in Highland Park. Tuesday, April 20, 2021 Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

The kids in Christine Gappa's kindergarten class sat cross-legged on the rug, enraptured by a reading of the day's story-time selection, "Mrs. Wishy Washy" and shouting along farm animal onomatopoeia.

When they moved on to their next activity and students shifted to a semi-circle formation around their tables, a classroom aide reminded students to space out. No mention of three feet versus six feet, the updated CDC guidance that's allowed for classrooms nationwide to increase enrollment — just a reflexive command obediently obeyed.

“Especially this age group, it's hard to switch back and forth, so if we just stick with something that they know and it's consistent, they're more likely to adhere to it,” Gappa, a kindergarten teacher at Irving Primary School in Highland Park, told NJ Advance Media on a recent visit to the classroom.



Irving School in Highland Park. Tuesday, April 20, 2021 Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

The new [three-foot-rule](#), issued in March and loosening a year of CDC guidance that called for “physical distancing (at least 6 feet)” to be “maximized to the greatest extent possible” has allowed Highland Park

Schools to increase enrollment.

And yet, the much-clamored-for update, a central demand of [protesting parents who rallied for Gov. Phil Murphy to take action](#) and bring students back for in-person instruction, hasn't made much of a difference in Highland Park.

"We really didn't make a big shift when we went to three feet," Superintendent Scott Taylor told NJ Advance Media. "Moving to three-foot distances didn't magically create more space — yeah, we were able to fit a few more students into our classes, but we found it didn't make a huge difference in enrollment."



Pre-K teacher Victoria Zarra works with students during class at Irving School in Highland Park. Tuesday, April 20, 2021 Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

While six more students were able to switch from virtual to in-person instruction at Irving Primary School and 18 came back to Bartle Elementary School, an overwhelming majority of Highland Park students are still learning from home. Districtwide, about 60% of students have opted for remote instruction, citing health and safety concerns, Taylor said.

As of Tuesday, New Jersey reported [254 in-school coronavirus outbreaks](#), which have resulted in 1,125 cases among students, teachers and school staff this academic year, according to [state data](#).

In-person learning has [continued to increase across the state](#), hitting a new high again this week with 30% of schools offering fully in-person education. At the start of the school year, only 9.5% of districts were fully open.

But the reason more elementary schoolers haven't rushed back into classrooms in Highland Park is a straightforward one: it would require switching teachers after nearly a full school year spent with a different one.

Almost all of Irving's virtual learners have been paired with teachers leading instruction from home. About 35% of teachers in the district are currently virtual with Taylor allowing accommodations for those with medical documentation [much more liberally than many of his fellow superintendents](#).



William Roberts works on his school work in his first grade classroom taught by Val Poli and Lauren King at the Lillian Drive elementary school in Hazlet, N.J. April, 15, 2021Ed Murray | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

Meanwhile, a 30-minute drive down the Parkway to a different district revealed a slightly different employment of distancing guidelines.

In Hazlet's Lillian Drive Elementary School, where students have had [the option to be in-person for five half-days a week since September](#), the three-foot rule didn't have an effect on enrollment numbers. While in-person enrollment is up to 94% from 87% in September, the building had been able to accommodate all 238 students on the roster from the beginning of the year.

Still, teachers have begun rearranging classrooms or using the three-foot rule simply to make instruction and group activities easier.

"Since we have more students coming in, it is a nice flexibility to have," Principal Kathleen Matsutani told NJ Advance Media.



Boa Yahara get help from teacher Val Poli in first grade at the Lillian Drive elementary school in Hazlet, N.J. April, 15, 2021Ed Murray | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

Lillian Drive assigned an extra teacher to second, third and fourth grade this year, allowing students to be split more sparsely among classrooms.

Regardless of six feet versus three, students in both districts demonstrated total adherence to the rules. Children dutifully wore their masks, stayed in their seats when asked and adhered to class contracts pinned to the wall which included rules like "wear a mask," and "practice social distancing" along with "use inside voices" and "always try your best."

Even the antsiest of pre-K students, constantly jumping up and down from his chair with a raised hand, knew to stay within his own personal radius, an act of restraint not typically associated with fidgety preschoolers.



Pre-K students Naseem Farouki listens during class at Irving School in Highland Park. Tuesday, April 20, 2021 Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

"We have not had one problem with a child not wearing a mask," Irving Principal Megan McNally told NJ Advance Media. "But we also spent a lot of time teaching the kids through videos and through age-appropriate activities what it means to social distance, why mask-wearing is important... teaching them what a pandemic is."

Gappa, whose kindergarten class featured rectangular tables separated by decorated plexiglass barriers adorned with patterned paper, said she reminds students to stay a "wingspan" apart. Students learned about bats earlier in the year and she said the concept helps them conceptualize what a safe distance looks like.

"This whole thing is very scary for them, and we're trying to make it as

comfortable as possible," Gappa said.

And while they might be unaware of a change in CDC guidelines, what students do notice is having new friends in the classroom, teachers said.



Kindergarten teacher Christine Gappa, works with children as they play out a book during class at Irving School in Highland Park. Tuesday, April 20, 2021 Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

Even if it only included a handful of students, offering that change to enrollment and allowing students to come back to school, was important for Taylor.

"We want to do as much as we can, particularly at the Primary level, to transition students into the next school year as effectively as possible," he said. "We would rather not have kids come in September and really for the first time in a long time all of a sudden be interacting with their peers, not

having been exposed to that environment."

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