



# Newton County School System

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PLAN FOR RETURN TO IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION – UPDATED 05/2023



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# Introduction

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Although the transmission of COVID-19 in our community is very low, we are required to update and share our NCSS Return to School plan. This plan is designed to explain our current prevention and mitigation strategies. As it stands, the Newton County

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*Vision: Students will be well-rounded and prepared for the future*  
*Mission: Educational excellence for all students*

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School System does not have a mask mandate but does *recommend* the wearing of a mask. We all understand how uncomfortable masks can be, but we also recognize their importance in a multi-layered approach to eliminating viruses. Our NCSS Return to School plan is comprehensive, systematic, and multi-faceted. At its core is the safety and health of students and staff. The plan includes specific information regarding maintaining student and staff health and safety and how to ensure continuity of services for academic and social-emotional needs. Additionally, the plan describes how the system will meet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance to the greatest extent practicable. In an effort to ensure our schools remain open, we plan to continue implementing prevention and mitigation strategies as necessary. After two years of managing the processes and procedures, many of the protocols have become second nature to our students and staff.

One of the school system’s core beliefs is that respectful partnerships among students, staff, parents, and the community are integral to student success. As such, the school system will gather input from all stakeholders through a public comment process.

With this plan in place, our objective is to ensure a healthy and safe learning environment for our students and staff. As our students and staff have shown, by implementing prevention techniques we can make a difference and reduce/eliminate the spread of COVID-19 in our schools.

Finally, we encourage all staff, families, and students who are eligible to get a COVID-19 vaccination. By working together, we can ensure a safe haven for our students and staff during the school year.

Student and staff health and safety is addressed in the section of the document entitled *Layers of Safety: Prevention Strategies*. The academic and social-emotional needs of students are addressed in the final two sections.

We thank you for your continued support.

# Layers of Safety: Prevention Strategies

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An essential goal for the school system is to reduce or eliminate in-school transmission of COVID-19 for in-person instruction and operations. As such, the school system will continue utilizing a multi-layered approach to mitigating the risk of exposure to COVID-19. Each strategy in the plan decreases the risk of exposure and the measures are consistent with the recommendations made by the CDC, the Georgia Department of Public Health, and other health organizations. The CDC has shared it is critical that schools utilize layered prevention strategies. The strategies in the layered approach are identified by the CDC as essential to an effective mitigation plan. Collectively, the nine prevention strategies represent a clear and systemic plan that will mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 in schools and can be effectively communicated to students, parents, guardians, and school system staff.

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General Measures
Prevention Strategy 1: Promoting Vaccination
Prevention Strategy 2: Consistent & Correct Mask Use
Prevention Strategy 3: Physical Distancing
Prevention Strategy 4: Screening Testing
Prevention Strategy 5: Ventilation
Prevention Strategy 6: Handwashing & Respiratory Etiquette
Prevention Strategy 7: Staying Home When Sick & Getting Tested
Prevention Strategy 8: Contact Tracing in Combination with Quarantine
Prevention Strategy 9: Cleaning & Disinfection
Supplemental Strategy 1: Train Staff and Educate Families
Supplemental Strategy 2: Maintain Healthy Operations

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## General Measures

To keep schools open and students and staff safe, the school system will monitor and continue to communicate with local, state, and national health organizations to determine disease levels and appropriate control measures for the community. The school system will also regularly review the guidance provided by organizations such as the CDC, Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH), United States Department of Education, Georgia Department of Education, and the Gwinnet, Newton, Rockdale Health Department and other agencies. The information garnered through these communications and monitoring processes will ensure the school system remains responsive to the pandemic and associated guidance.

The CDC’s Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools currently aligns precautions for educational settings with those for other community settings. The CDC identifies three categories of community transmission of COVID-19 – low (green), medium (yellow), and high (orange) — based on three metrics: (1) total new COVID-19 hospital admissions per 100,000 persons in the past 7 days, (2) the percentage of staffed inpatient beds occupied by COVID-19 patients, and (3) the total number of new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 persons in the past 7 days, to determine the COVID-19 community level.<sup>1</sup> School and district leaders will refer to the CDC COVID-19 Data Tracker for county-level data when making decisions on appropriate mitigation and prevention strategies.

Despite careful planning and consistent implementation of prevention strategies, some situations may lead school officials to consider temporarily closing schools or parts of a school (such as a class, cohort, or grade level) to in-person instruction, in consultation with the local health department. These decisions will be made based on careful consideration of a variety of factors and with the emphasis on ensuring the health, safety and wellness of students, their families, and teachers and staff. In such cases, the school system will make efforts to provide continuity of instruction through synchronous remote learning or at-home activities.

In addition to these general measures described in the preceding, the school system will utilize the following prevention strategies and supplemental strategies as part of a layered approach for mitigation.

### Prevention Strategy 1: Promoting Vaccinations

According to the CDC, COVID-19 vaccination among all eligible students as well as teachers, staff, and their respective household members is the most critical strategy to help schools safely resume full operations. Widespread vaccination is a critical tool to help stop the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The school system made vaccinations available to students, staff, and their respective family members in partnership with DPH throughout the school year. The school system will continue to monitor vaccination trends to determine the need to offer additional vaccination opportunities at school sites.

### Prevention Strategy 2: Consistent & Correct Mask Use

When teachers, staff, and students consistently and correctly wear a mask, they protect others as well as themselves. Consistent and correct mask use is especially important indoors and in crowded settings, when physical distancing cannot be maintained.<sup>2</sup> Masks are a simple barrier to help prevent the spread of respiratory droplets. Respiratory droplets travel into the air when you cough, sneeze, talk, shout, or sing. Currently, the school system **does not have a mask mandate** but does recommend wearing a mask. The school system will monitor the school guidance provided by the CDC and DPH as it relates to the use of face coverings (masks). The school system understands the use of face coverings decreases the risk of transmission within the school setting.<sup>2</sup>

### Prevention Strategy 3: Physical Distancing

The CDC has identified physical distancing as strategy in avoiding exposure to the virus and slowing the spread of COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> Physical distancing refers to strategically applied interventions that increase the space between people and decrease the frequency of close contact interactions to avoid spreading the virus. Physical distancing strategies are included in the following:

#### *Arrivals and Departures*

- Maximize space between students and the driver on school buses.
- Minimize contact between students, staff, families and the community at the beginning and end of the school day.
- Designate routes for entry and exit. Put other protocols in place to limit direct contact between people as much as practicable.
- Ensure each school bus is equipped with extra unused face coverings for students who may have inadvertently failed to bring one.

### *Classroom Spaces*

- Maximize space between seating and desks. Maintain a minimum of 3 feet between students as practicable.

### *Cafeteria, Band, and Chorus*

- Maintain a minimum of 6 feet, as practicable, between students and staff in cafeterias as face coverings cannot be worn while eating. Keep students together in stable groups as much as possible.
- Maintain a minimum of 6 feet, as practicable, during activities when increased exhalation occurs (e.g. chorus, band, physical education). The use of outdoor space for these activities is encouraged.

### *Meetings*

- Decrease nonessential in-person interaction among teachers and staff during meetings, lunches, and other situations that could lead to adult-to-adult transmission.

### *Visitors*

- Limit any nonessential visitors, volunteers, and activities. Visitors will be required to follow mitigation protocols as established by the school district.

### *School Buses*

- Physical distancing will be practiced as ridership allows.

## **Prevention Strategy 4: Screening Testing**

The school system works in conjunction with DPH to ensure staff and students have access to Covid-19 testing. The testing provided by the school system includes screening, symptomatic, and response testing. Screening testing identifies infected people, including those with or without symptoms (or before the development of symptoms) who may be contagious, so that measures can be taken to prevent further transmission. Symptomatic testing is used for individuals with symptoms of COVID-19. Response testing is used to identify positive individuals once a case has been identified in a stable group. The school system will continue to monitor trends to determine the need to offer additional screening testing opportunities at school sites.

## **Prevention Strategy 5: Ventilation**

Improving ventilation is an important COVID-19 prevention strategy that can reduce the number of virus particles in the air.<sup>2</sup> Heating and air conditioning systems are critical components in providing safe and clean building environments. The design of each HVAC system includes the introduction of outside air into the building, as recommended by the CDC. We ensure this fresh air intake functionality through regular preventive maintenance activities. With the use of ESSER III funds, the school district is in the process of upgrading and replacing aging HVAC systems in a number of schools.

The CDC also recommends increased air filtration. Increased filtration means that the filter removes smaller particles from the building's recirculated air. Increasing the filter rating throughout the district

from Minimum Efficiency Reporting Values (MERV) 10 to MERV 13 will vastly reduce the number of airborne particles that pass through the filter, creating improved air quality within the buildings.<sup>3</sup>

### Prevention Strategy 6: Handwashing and Respiratory Etiquette

Handwashing is one of the best ways to protect yourself from getting sick.<sup>4</sup> Washing hands can keep you healthy and prevent the spread of respiratory and diarrheal infections from one person to the next. Germs can spread from other people or surfaces when you:

- Touch your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Prepare or eat food and drinks with unwashed hands.
- Touch contaminated surfaces or objects.
- Blow your nose, cough, or sneeze into hands and then touch other people's hands or common objects.<sup>4</sup>

The school system will promote frequent handwashing through the use of scheduled handwashing breaks integrated into daily schedules as practicable. The school system will ensure an adequate supply of soap, paper towels, and hand sanitizer. Hand sanitizing stations will be strategically placed throughout each facility. Students, staff, and families will be educated on ways to prevent contracting and spreading the virus such as covering coughs and sneezes with tissue or elbows, washing and sanitizing hands, avoiding touching faces, and practicing physical distancing. These measures will be reinforced through the use of posted signs in classrooms, hallways, entrances, and other high traffic areas throughout each facility.

### Prevention Strategy 7: Staying Home When Sick & Getting Tested

Staying home when sick with COVID-19 is essential to keep COVID-19 infections out of schools and prevent spread to others.<sup>2</sup> An important part of keeping our students and staff safe is to actively communicate and require that students and staff members remain home if they are ill or experiencing symptoms of COVID-19. Symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath, chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, and loss of taste or smell. Students, teachers, and staff who have symptoms of COVID-19, should stay home and be referred to their healthcare provider for testing and care, regardless of vaccination status.

Health screening guidelines correspond with CDC and DPH recommendations and guidelines. These include temperature checks and self-assessment of symptoms for all students, staff, and visitors before entering school buildings or boarding school buses. Parents and guardians play a critical role in the screening of students by checking their children for symptoms of COVID-19 each morning before sending them to school. All students, visitors, and staff members must stay at home if they have symptoms, have tested positive, or had close contact with a person with COVID-19. Employees must assess themselves for symptoms each day before reporting to work. Individuals who develop symptoms while on campus will be isolated and sent home.





An essential component of our transportation plan involves the daily screening of students and staff for symptoms of COVID-19 before boarding the school bus. Parents will assess their children for fever and other symptoms each morning. School bus drivers and monitors will self-screen for symptoms each morning before reporting to work. Students and staff with fevers of 100.4 or greater, or exhibiting other signs of illness, will not be allowed to ride the bus.

### **Prevention Strategy 8: Contact Tracing in Combination with Quarantine**

The CDC encourages employers to collaborate with health departments when investigating workplace exposures to infectious diseases, including COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> Quick and coordinated actions, including case investigation and contact tracing, may lower the need for business closures to prevent the spread of the disease. The school system has developed a comprehensive and responsive contact tracing process. The process is orchestrated by a lead response team and supported by nurses at each school. The team works closely with GNR Health and the DPH.

If a student or staff member develops signs of COVID-19, he or she is immediately separated from others until they can leave. While waiting to leave, the individual will wear a surgical mask. The staff member or student's parent informs the school immediately if there is a positive test result for COVID-19. When a student, teacher, staff member, or visitor tests positive for COVID-19, the school system works in conjunction with the local health department regarding home quarantine or isolation requirements and close contact notification protocol. The school system will continue to work closely with GNR Health and DPH to determine necessary school closures.

### **Prevention Strategy 9: Cleaning and Disinfecting**

Cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting are part of a broad approach to preventing communicable diseases in schools. Daily cleaning and disinfection of frequently touched surfaces such as desks, doorknobs, light switches, faucet handles, handrails, tables, countertops, and telephones using EPA approved cleaners will decrease the risk of transmission.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Facilities*

Schools and other facilities will be cleaned daily, and high touch surfaces will be sanitized throughout the day. Cleaning protocols will be used in computer labs, media centers, and athletic facilities. The school system will continue to ensure that cleaning, disinfecting, and sanitization procedures align with CDC and DPH guidelines.

#### *School Buses*

School buses will be cleaned after morning and afternoon routes and windows will be opened as frequently as possible (weather permitting) to allow for additional ventilation and airflow to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Cleaning will focus on high touch surfaces such as seats, handrails, steering wheel, windows, and other fixtures. Drivers will be responsible for wiping down the seats and handrails after every run. School buses will be equipped with hand sanitizer, disinfectant wipes, cleaners and disinfectant sprays, gloves and, other appropriate PPE.

### *Playgrounds*

Outdoor playgrounds and natural play areas need only routine maintenance. Students will wash or sanitize hands before and after using these spaces.

### *Drinking Water*

Water fountains are currently enabled in all schools. Students may also bring water from home or use bottle filling stations, which have been installed in all schools.

### *Limit Use of Shared Items*

Students and staff will be discouraged from sharing books, materials, supplies, or equipment.

### *Community Use of School Facilities*

To maintain safe and controlled access to buildings and facilities, as well as to prioritize cleaning and disinfecting, community use of school buildings will be allowed; however, all mitigation strategies outlined in this plan must be followed.

## **Supplemental Strategy 1: Train Staff and Educate Families**

The school system will provide training to staff and provide educational information to families.

### *Staff*

School and system staff participate in a course designed to give an overview of the rise and nature of COVID-19. Topics covered include symptoms and risk factors; what you can do to help reduce your chances of becoming infected; and where to find reliable news and information about COVID-19.

### *Families*

Information and updates to families and other stakeholders will be shared through multiple platforms including phone calls, emails, the school website, and social media outlets. Stakeholders will be able to quickly access relevant information such as school system updates, response or prevention measures, response to frequently asked questions, common preventative measures for families, and links to external information sources such as the CDC and DPH. Targeted social media and communication campaigns will be used to further educate stakeholders on prevention strategies. Signage will also be placed in schools and other school system buildings to share information about how to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

## **Supplemental Strategy 2: Maintain Healthy Operations**

The school system will provide other services and establish additional processes in an effort to mitigate the risk posed by COVID-19.

### *Nurses and Student Health Services*

All schools in the district have a full-time nurse on staff. The nurses in the schools assist with medication delivery, injury triage, and training, as well as other health-related needs. As it relates to COVID-19, school nurses will assist in screening individuals and designating an isolation area for persons who have exhibited initial symptoms. In the event that the school nurse is notified of confirmed COVID-19 cases, they will report these cases to the local health department and appropriate district personnel. In the 2021-2022

school year, the school district utilized ESSER III funds to provide additional school nurses to support the return of in-person learners and contact tracing.

#### *Athletics*

The Georgia High School Association has provided guidance regarding return to sport activities for Georgia high schools. The school system athletic director and school administration teams meet periodically to discuss any updates to the guidance from GHSA and make adjustments to the school system's guidance. Although the GHSA does not govern middle school sports, the same guidelines are used for middle school sports. Additionally, extra-curricular safety protocols have been developed, reviewed, and implemented.

#### *Band, Chorus, Dance, Cheer, and Other Extra-Curricular Programs*

Newton County officials have created marching band guidelines by referencing the guidelines from GHSA and the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) music committee.

#### *Registration for Transportation Services*

For students who are registered after July 23, 2021, a parent or guardian must request transportation services during the registration process. Students will be routed to their primary address. This process, the routing of buses based on confirmed ridership, will allow resources to be reallocated in a way that provides for greater social distancing on buses.

#### *Meal Service for In-Person Students*

Students will pick up meals by going through the serving lines in the cafeteria. The following safety precautions will be in place:

- Employees will plate all food items (no self-service option).
- Students will practice physical distancing while in the line.
- Students will be spaced out while eating in the cafeteria or outside.
- Frequent cleaning of high touched areas.

#### *Meal Service for Virtual Students*

Students who participate in the virtual learning models will be able to pick up meals from any school.

#### *Supply Acquisition*

The school system is working to procure and maintain an adequate supply of materials needed for normal school operations and any alternative scenarios deemed necessary. The school system currently holds contracts with numerous suppliers and is working with them to provide the necessary materials and supplies critical to school operations. These contracts will be utilized to the fullest extent possible to ensure that our supply needs are met. All contracts will be monitored and modified as needed to best meet the needs and interests of the school system. In addition to existing contracts, the school system will utilize alternative public and private sector suppliers to build and maintain our inventory, as required. As the supply chain recovers, we anticipate that the situation will improve. We will continue to identify and examine multiple sources of supply while planning for both short-term and long-term needs.

# Continuity of Services: Teaching and Learning

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In Newton County Schools, we have not lost sight of our mission to provide educational excellence for all students. Indeed, we strive to make sure all students are well-rounded and prepared for the future. We continually look for opportunities to substantively impact student achievement, especially as students rebound from the educational impact of COVID-19.

## Collection of Data

Student performance data from the following formative, interim, and summative assessments during the 2021-22 school year have been collected and synthesized: IOWA; Next Steps Guided Reading Assessment (NSGRA); Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS); Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT); Acadience; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Reading Inventory; and the Georgia Milestones End of Grade and End of Course Assessments (review in process). Also, classroom performance data and student files from the Response to Intervention Academic Support System have been reviewed.

## Response to Data

Presently, *Classworks* is used at several of the district's elementary and middle schools, and most schools have intervention programs where students' challenges are addressed during the school day. Across the district, tutoring programs are in place in-person and virtually, including our Expert Teachers Bureau and 21st Century After School Programs. The district also is implementing a five-week summer academic support program for students in kindergarten through twelfth grades. Most of the district's schools have personnel devoted solely to implementing and managing the Multi-Tiered System of Supports Program, which allows teachers to monitor student progress in real time and provide evidence-based interventions. Additionally, teachers are able to continue and adjust the intensity and nature of interventions based on a student's responsiveness.

## Response to Ongoing Needs

In an effort to strengthen our response to students' academic needs during the 2022-23 school year as a result of learning opportunity loss, the district will implement high-frequency tutoring during the school day; schedule time for academic interventions during the school day; continue to bolster the Multi-Tiered System of Supports Program in each school; and offer academic support programs during the summer.

In the face of ever-changing times, Newton County Schools is committed to being stable in meeting the needs of our students. What does change, however, is our response to addressing the challenges of learning opportunity loss as we pledge to review, adapt, and update our plans periodically based on the needs of our students.

# Continuity of Services: Social-Emotional Supports

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As we plan for the next school year, the social-emotional well-being of students, their families, and staff is a priority. A variety of flexible resources and supports will be available that address a range of student needs. Each new school year brings excitement. It can also cause students and parents to be anxious. The effects of COVID-19 have had an impact on students, families, and school system staff members across Georgia. These universal impacts have heightened the need for learning environments that are welcoming to and supportive of all students. The school system has carefully considered how to address the needs of all student sub-groups.

We can help students weather this crisis through recognizing and responding to their emotions and leaning on positive, prosocial relationships. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is critical to re-engage students, support adults, rebuild relationships and school communities, and create equitable learning environments for all students. The school system will offer a variety of resources to support learning as the transition back-to-school begins.

## 24/7 Access to Social-Emotional Supports

Students and families will have access to an online social-emotional program that offers videos and resources to help students achieve academic, behavioral, and social-emotional success. This program will be instrumental in ensuring all students have immediate access to these types of resources.

## School Counselors

Students will have online and in-person access to school counselors who are available to work with students on academic, emotional, and social concerns that impact student success. In support of the whole child, the counseling program will be critical in monitoring the emotional well-being of students. All schools have a counseling department equipped to support the diverse needs of the students they serve. Additionally, individual and group sessions are available and facilitated by trained professional counselors.

## Social Workers

Students will have access to social workers who are available to work with students and families with concerns that may affect student success, such as academic, behavior management, mental health, and social-emotional concerns. As an instrumental component in the overall success of our students, social workers will support families with concerns that may impact student learning. Five social workers support all schools and local agencies to provide wrap-around services for the students and families of Newton County.

## The Georgia Apex Program

The *Apex Program*, *Viewpoint Health* provides 11 clinicians to serve students and families in the Newton County School System. Students receive face-to-face mental health counseling services both in person and virtually, by a licensed clinician. When appropriate, family counseling is provided to strengthen the student's support system, thereby increasing the opportunity for academic success. The school district will utilize ESSER III funds to provide additional mental health support to a select number of schools.

## Purposity

*Purposity* is a program designed to assist students and families in need of general supplies to support student achievement. The school system's counselors and social workers identify the needs of students and families (e.g. school supplies, clothes), and those needs are forwarded to *Purposity*. A description of the need is posted, which enables anyone with the downloadable app to click on a link and donate to meet that need. It's a simple and easy way for people to help our students and families who need their support.

## Youth Mental Health First Aid

District administrators and other school staff have participated in *Youth Mental Health First Aid* training to support our students' emotional well-being. *Youth Mental Health First Aid* is designed to teach individuals how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance abuse. *Youth Mental Health First Aid* is primarily designed for adults who regularly interact with young people. This 8-hour training gives adults who work with youth the skills they need to reach out and provide initial support to students who may be developing a mental health problem and help connect them to the appropriate care. Topics covered during the training include anxiety, depression, substance abuse, disorders in which psychosis may occur, disruptive behavior disorders (including AD/HD), and eating disorders.

## No Place for Hate

For the third consecutive year, the school system earned the designation as a *No Place for Hate* system by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), as each school in the district participates in the program. No Place for Hate is an initiative of the ADL offered free to schools. This initiative is a PK-12 school climate improvement framework for combatting bias, bullying, and hatred, leading to long-term solutions for creating and maintaining a positive and equitable climate. The *No Place for Hate* initiative is designed to rally the entire school around the goal of creating a welcoming community committed to stopping all forms of bias and bullying. Upon completion of the required program components, schools receive a *No Place for Hate* banner that can be proudly displayed in the school.

## Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

The *Employee Assistance Program* (EAP) is sponsored by *Mutual of Omaha* and is an employer-paid program that provides resources to assist with personal and job-related issues. EAP improves the productivity and well-being of employees, resulting in an improved workplace culture. The school system offers this benefit free to all employees and their dependents. *Mutual of Omaha* provides an EAP website that includes important information and resources for employees on a variety of topics including:

emotional well-being, healthy lifestyles, family and relationships, legal and financial issues, and work/life transitions.

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