

COVID-19 Variables that Will Shape the 2021-22 School Year



High-level inputs that might impact school and district planning

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and Oregon Health Authority (OHA) recognize that school leaders and local school boards are currently working through budget, staffing, and planning processes for the academic year ahead. This document offers insights into known COVID-19 variables that might have the most significant impact on planning. The goal is to name the variables to inform community engagement and planning efforts. This document does not contain guidance or decisions, but it does contain information we think may be helpful at this point in time.

Responding to COVID-19 will remain critical for educators in the year ahead. The kind of certainty that is almost universally desired is not yet available. There is one thing we can be certain of: The 2021-22 school year won't be a complete return to what school operations looked like in the fall of 2019 before COVID-19 impacted the way we go about schooling. ODE and OHA are currently reviewing and updating guidance for summer school and the year ahead. The review process includes revisiting some core assumptions based on the most current science and data available. Still, guidance for the next school year won't be delivered soon enough comprehensively inform the current planning processes described above. COVID-19 presents a dynamic challenge that demands we remain nimble and respond to the progress of the disease in Oregon with the most up-to-date data, evidence and science available. Much like the journey over the past year, guidance is likely to change through the weeks and months ahead.

The aim for 2021-22 guidance will be to take advantage of every mitigation tool available (vaccination, testing, face coverings, etc.) to offer school in-person to the greatest extent possible.

Primary Variables

Higher-order inputs that will impact 2021-22 guidance and school planning decisions

- 1. Variants:** On February 26, 2021, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky issued a warning about easing requirements on wearing face coverings, maintaining physical distance and continuing progress with widespread vaccinations amid concerns about new variants from the U.K., South America, South Africa, California and New York. "We are done with the virus but unfortunately the virus may not be done with us," said Walensky. Oregon's community case rates are currently relatively low and there is great hope that, with the measures in place and ongoing vaccination efforts, we may be at a positive turning point. But the pandemic is far from over. Despite our fatigue and frustration, we have a collective responsibility to remain vigilant and adaptive to the needs of our community as COVID-19 continues to spread.

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- 2. Vaccination.** Providing COVID-19 vaccinations to educators and high-risk groups was an important first step in getting our schools and communities reopened. As vaccinations begin to reach the entire adult population, no later than July 1 according to Governor Kate Brown, community spread and risk of significant illness is expected to decline. Vaccine hesitancy remains a challenge in meeting coverage levels needed for community immunity. Risks remain and there is still more scientific evidence needed on how existing vaccines respond to the new variants and to determine whether additional boosters will be needed. Although vaccine trials in children and adolescents are underway, we don't yet know whether pediatric vaccines will be available by fall 2021. Attention to vaccination will be constant while we shape other risk mitigation strategies and planning choices.
- 3. Cases.** Our planning efforts will be largely influenced by the incidence of COVID-19 and the number of new cases detected each day. Once enough people have immunity to the virus, sustained spread of COVID-19 will stop and new cases will drop to a low level. Sporadic cases and localized outbreaks will still occur, but can be contained with rapid response employing isolation, quarantine and vaccination. Given that vaccination *may* be less effective against new variants, case rates and hospitalizations will continue to influence school operations. We will have to remain vigilant.
- 4. Shift to Local Decision-Making.** In July, equitable grading and credit-awarding practices shifted back to local development and implementation. This January, Oregon returned to local decision-making and shifted from mandatory to advisory metrics. That structure is unlikely to change. There may be further adaptations to the advisory metrics frameworks (the benchmarks that advise different instructional model choices). If the science continues to reveal the effectiveness of following Ready Schools, Safe Learners protocols with fidelity, there could be stronger policy developed to return students to in-person learning and graduated protocols based on local COVID-19 metrics.
- 5. Federal, CDC, and U.S. Department of Education Guidance.** Two weeks ago, new K-12 related guidance was released by the CDC and the U.S. Department of Education. A new COVID-19 relief package is also moving through Congress. This package is likely to be more prescriptive in what makes schools eligible for funding and how that funding may be spent. This new, nationally coordinated direction may change the way schools operate in the coming months with an aim towards accommodating in-person instructional models.
- 6. Equity.** Black, Indigenous, Tribal, Latino, Latina, Latinx, Pacific Islander, Asian and communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. National, state and local planning efforts must acknowledge these disparities. We must be

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inclusive of community voices in planning, especially communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and those whose access to education and other resources has been interrupted. Updated guidance will reflect this priority.

Additional Inputs and Considerations

Second-order variables that are also important to consider

- **Effectiveness of Instructional Models.** We've all adapted to provide the most effective educational offerings to students in any form possible. Our educators should be applauded for this effort. While these efforts have reduced spread, they've also impacted different student communities and families in different ways. We must strive to understand what worked and for which students. We must build on effective practices, using equity-based decision tools and deep community engagement to strengthen relationships and understand how to improve reach and instruction in this time. Returning to in-person instruction should not be a return to school as we knew it before COVID-19.
- **Cohorting.** The recommended cohort size of 24-36 students and Oregon's maximum design for a cohort of 100 students will be revisited. It is not yet clear how, or if any, change will be made, and this variable will move in response to changes in other variables.
- **LPHA Capacity.** The role of local public health authorities (LPHAs) continues to surface as an implementation variable. If community spread and disease severity are positively impacted by widespread acceptance of vaccines, then LPHA capacity should improve. Our ability to relax cohort restrictions and other health and safety protocols is dependent upon the ability of LPHAs to respond effectively to potential outbreaks in schools.
- **Financial Resources.** School districts are likely to receive significant state and federal funding to further support addressing the physical equipment and ventilation needs schools have, as well as the social-emotional, mental health and academic needs students have over the next year. These funds are likely to be more targeted than previous funds.
- **Seasonal Impacts.** The largest spike in COVID-19 cases was in the winter months. The scientific community is attempting to better understand how this might impact school-year planning. It is clear that COVID-19 spreads less easily in outdoor spaces and ODE has released guidance to allow for the creative integration of outdoor space to support in-person learning.

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- **Recommendation and Requirements.** If community spread and disease severity are reduced by vaccinations, we will likely see additional shifts from state decision-making to local decision-making and from requirements to recommendations. Alternatively, if case rates spike again due to the impact of variants, we may see a continuation of state decisions and requirements to reduce spread in schools.

The Clearest Constants

What is unlikely to change for the Fall of 2021

1. **The absolute value and importance of face coverings.** The science confirms that wearing face coverings is an effective risk mitigation strategy. Recent updates to CDC guidance reflect this understanding. Face coverings will continue to be important in the year ahead.
2. **Physical distance mitigates the risk of spread.** The science is clear that maintaining physical distance reduces spread of COVID-19. Experts offer varying ideas regarding the distance that is needed as well as the distance in relation to the duration of time people are in the same space. It remains unclear whether or not there can be any reduction from Oregon's current requirement of six feet of physical distance. It's possible that there could be some adjustment on this variable that would allow for more students in a classroom. However, some degree of physical distance will remain in place.
3. **The OHA school-based antigen testing program is helpful.** While this is an optional program that is required for districts operating outside of advisory metrics, this new resource is another important layer of risk mitigation that we anticipate to continue and possibly grow.