

Introduction

As Catholic schools in the Diocese of Winona-Rochester prepare for the 2021-2022 academic year, we are eager for the opportunity to partner with parents in the education of their children.

Beginning in March 2020, and continuing through the 2020-2021 school year, our deep concern about the risks of COVID-19 and love of neighbor, along with our responsibility to adhere to the regulations unprecedented restrictions and requirements on teachers, students, and families. We did this in solidarity with the broader community in order to give the healthcare system an opportunity to prepare, to give the scientific community an opportunity to gain knowledge, and to give those who were most vulnerable an opportunity to receive a safe and effective vaccine.

The last eighteen months of educating during the global COVID-19 pandemic have taught us a lot about the implication of these restrictions and requirements. While some disease mitigation strategies have had a minimal effect on children, we have also become much more aware of the disproportionate negative effects associated with others. Many of these mitigation strategies place a great burden on the well-being of children and families. Catholic schools of the DOW-R have shown that we are willing to impose these burdens, and we remain willing to impose them when circumstances warrant.

Thankfully the circumstances surrounding the start of the upcoming year are very different from those we faced a year ago. As Catholic school educators who look broadly at all goods, we are confident that when we take all factors into consideration, the following Pandemic Preparedness Plan Template for Catholic Schools in the DOW-R prudently and proportionately applies public health strategies that will create the best environment for student to flourish physically, mentally, emotionally, academically, and spiritually in Catholic schools during the upcoming academic year as well as slow the spread of COVID-19. Guided by scientific findings, we are taking a broad multilayered strategic approach to disease mitigation rather than focusing on single strategies.

We continue to monitor the situation closely and will provide updates as needed. With the information that is currently available, Catholic schools in the DOW-R will continue to responsibly plan and take the action steps outlined in the Pandemic Preparedness Plan Template to lower the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Further guidance from the State and legal mandates for nonpublic schools in MN will be evaluated on an as needed basis through the academic year.

We pray for all our families and ask for the prayers of the entire Catholic school community as we all seek the wisdom and courage to continue the essential work for the sake of one of our moral endeavors-the education of our children.

Pandemic Preparedness and Readiness Plan for Catholic Schools

2021-2022 Academic Year

At a minimum, and absent any legal mandates from the State of Minnesota for nonpublic schools, all Catholic schools will implement the following strategies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 during the 2021-2022 academic year:

Promoting Behaviors That Reduce the Spread of the Disease

- a) Students and employees are required to stay home when they are sick. Schools must promptly send children and employees home when they display symptoms of COVID-19 illness.
- b) Schools will articulate expectations for student health checks by parents at home before sending children to school. Parents will be reminded to keep sick children home.
- c) Schools will teach and reinforce proper handwashing hygiene and respiratory etiquette.
- d) In determining when student may return to school after an illness, schools will follow their standard illness exclusion policy (e.g. [fever-free for 24 hours without fever-reducing medication](#)) unless a student has a lab-confirmed case of COVID-19. Students with lab confirmed cases of COVID-19 are allowed to return to school when all of the following are true (MDH, 2021):
 - They feel better. Their cough, shortness of breath, or other symptoms have substantially improved;
 - It has been at least 10 days since they first felt sick or tested positive;
 - They have no fever for at least 24 hours, without using medicine that lowers fevers.
- e) A similar illness-exclusion policy will be made for employees.
- f) Schools will eliminate or prudently modify student attendance policy incentives that could cause a student to come to school when ill (e.g., “perfect attendance awards”). Responsive to our care for the whole child, schools are urged through the Pandemic to provide additional assistance to students who have experienced prolonged absence due to illness.

Maintaining Healthy Facilities

- g) Schools will evaluate the operational capacity of ventilation systems and increase and maintain ventilation through the building.
- h) Schools will have a plan for cleaning and disinfecting.
- i) Schools will provide adequate supplies for implementing its cleaning and disinfecting plan.
- j) Schools will ensure safe and correct use and storage of cleaning and disinfecting products, including always storing products securely away from children and using products that meet EPA disinfecting criteria.

Maintaining Healthy Operations

k) [Minnesota Rule 4605.7070](#) requires any person in charge of any institution, school, child care facility, or camp to [report cases of COVID-19](#) to MDH following procedures provided by MDH.

l) Schools will prudently evaluate their plan for in-person group events, gatherings, and meetings during the school day with respect to the risk of spreading COVID-19.

m) All visitors and vendors to schools will follow all school-defined safety and personal hygiene procedures. Until the Pandemic has run its course, visitors of volunteer, visitors, and vendors during the pandemic should be kept to the essential activities.

n) Schools will train all employees on the requirements of this Pandemic Preparedness Plan.

o) Schools will continue to communicate to students, families, and employees all expectations related to this Pandemic Preparedness Plan.

p) Schools will monitor compliance with these Pandemic Preparedness Plan requirements in a practicable manner to help ensure adherence among students.

q) School masses and other liturgical services must follow the diocesan protocols which can be obtained from the pastor.

2. The DOW-R makes the following recommendation to Catholic schools based on our shared wisdom of educating during the COVID-19 pandemic, the responsibility of parents as primary educators of their children, and the requirements of MN statues:

Vaccines: COVID-19 Vaccines are not required in Catholic schools of the DOW-R however, they are encouraged. Schools should inform families of the availability of the COVID-19 vaccine and provide support to families who desire to receive a vaccination.

COVID-19 Testing: Schools should inform families in writing of the availability of COVID-19 testing and the locations where testing is available and provide support to those families who desire to get tested. Catholic schools will not test students for COVID-19 or provide any other non-emergency health services to students without written parental consent.

Face Coverings: The State's legal mandate requiring face coverings in public and nonpublic schools expired at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. The DOW-R does not require Catholic school students or employees to wear face coverings. Parents and Guardians are well positioned to determine if their child should wear a face covering while outside of the home and out in the community. No student will be prevented from wearing a face covering. Catholic schools will work to reduce any stigmatization associated with the decision to wear or not wear a face covering. Based on local circumstances, the pastor and leadership team of the school

may institute a policy that further addresses this issue. The Face Coverings policy may need to change based on changing data.

At this time, all people are required by the CDC order to wear face coverings while in public transportation hubs and on all public transportation conveyances (airplanes, public buses, etc.), including school buses (both public and private).

Physical Distancing: Schools should promote public health recommendations for physical distancing provided they do not: 1) disproportionately impact child development or the educational goals of the school or 2) limit the school's ability to offer in-person learning to all of its students.

Contact Tracing: The responsibility for contact tracing lies with trained professionals at Minnesota Department of Health. Catholic schools should assist MDH by providing relevant information when requested.

Quarantine: Minnesota Department of Health no longer requires school leaders to quarantine individuals, entire classrooms, or groups of students on account of potential exposure to COVID-19.

Closing Catholic School Buildings: The decision to temporarily close a Catholic school building due to concerns about the spread of an infectious disease should be made on the advice of competent public health authorities. Schools should promptly notify the DOW-R Office of Catholic Schools of the decision to close a Catholic school building.

Change in Learning Models: Schools should minimize changes to the in-person learning model for individual students, classrooms, and schools.

Communications to Parents Regarding Exposure to Infectious Disease: When students are potentially exposed to any infectious disease (including but not limited to COVID-19) at school, school leaders will notify parents following their infectious disease notification policy. At a minimum, schools should provide families with the communicable disease fact sheet available from the [Infectious Diseases in Childcare Settings and Schools Manual](#).