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Memo

To: Pre-K-12 School Administrators

From: Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH)

Date: September 28, 2021

Subject: Guidance Updates on Responding to Symptoms

RIDOH is writing to share updated COVID-19 prevention strategies and guidance for Pre-K-12 schools regarding how to respond to virus symptoms.

The Pre-K-12 team developed additional guidance options to support Local Education Agencies (LEAs), to reduce the burden of COVID-19 response on schools, and to balance the risk of COVID-19 exposure and illness while maintaining in-person learning. The updates are based on data, as well as feedback from schools and families about the first weeks of the 2021-22 academic year.

Situation Overview

Pre-K-12 school-associated cases of COVID-19 in Rhode Island have outpaced last year. However, they proportionally represent the same share of all community cases. Case counts continue to increase, though the rate of increase has slowed over the last week. Secondary transmission, or spread, is estimated to be between 4% and 6% among close contacts exposed during the first week of school (based on current testing rates).

- From August 29 to September 21, there have been 1,539 COVID-19 cases among students, teachers, and staff associated with Pre-K-12 schools;
- From September 12 to 18, 24 new clusters were identified, 14 of which had three or more cases;
- 131 schools have at least one close contact with school-related exposure, while 85 schools have 10 or more;
- Schools have expressed that implementing current is difficult and not sustainable given current school staffing resources and case counts; and

- Schools and families expressed concerns that quarantine is affecting the physical and mental health of students, as well as causing loss of in-person learning time.

As a result, the team has developed additional guidance options for responding to COVID-19 in school settings.

Symptomatic Testing

LEAs/schools may choose one of the following options when staff and/or students are sick:

- Option A: (Current recommendation) Maintain current recommendation to stay home and/or isolate and get tested if an individual has any one COVID-19 symptom;
- Option B: Stay home and/or isolate and get tested if an individual has one major or two minor COVID-19 symptoms (i.e., “probable case” [clinical criteria](#) – the same criteria as last year);

RIDOH will communicate to primary care providers that they should apply the probable case clinical criteria when evaluating a patient and, if an alternate diagnosis is made (i.e., strep throat) provide a note attesting that the student/staff doesn’t have COVID-19 and may return to school. RIDOH will also discourage primary care providers from writing notes which exempt individuals from testing as a result of other conditions or illnesses.

Exclusion of Unvaccinated Household Members

Unvaccinated asymptomatic sibling(s)/household member(s) of a symptomatic student/staff are no longer recommended to be automatically excluded from school while the symptomatic person’s test results are pending. The household members are recommended to distance and wear masks at home while test results are pending.

Note: LEAs are encouraged to consider Centers for Disease Prevention & Control (CDC) and RIDOH recommendations when implementing COVID-19 prevention strategies, as well as current applicable laws: [federal law](#) requiring masks on public transportation, such as school buses, and Executive Orders requiring universal indoor [masking](#) in public K-12 schools and [quarantine and isolation](#).