

In Brief

ISBE PUBLISHES GUIDANCE FOR STARTING THE 2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR

On June 23rd, ISBE and IDPH published their latest installment of COVID-19-related joint guidance—this time addressing the transition back to in-person instruction during the fall 2020 semester. ISBE is “strongly encourag[ing]” that districts throughout the state return to in-person instruction during Phase 4 of the Governor’s Restore Illinois plan. At the same time, ISBE cautions districts to be mindful of the continued risks associated with COVID-19 and, to that end, is mandating that, during Phase 4, all Illinois schools serving pre-K through 12th grade students:

- Require use of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), including face coverings;
- Prohibit more than 50 individuals from gathering in one space;
- Require social distancing be observed, as much as possible;
- Conduct symptom screenings and temperature checks or require that individuals self-certify that they are free of symptoms before entering school buildings; and
- Increase schoolwide cleaning and disinfection.

Additionally, ISBE recommends that districts prepare for returning to remote instruction should a resurgence or second wave of the virus occur. In furtherance of these recommendations and directives, ISBE’s publication contains guidance related to planning, communication with families, blended remote learning days, student and staff attendance, calendar considerations, instructional recommendations, and health and safety protocols in accordance with IDPH guidance, which are addressed below.

PLANNING

The planning section of ISBE’s guidance provides an in-depth summary of recently passed legislation regarding the adoption and implementation of Remote and Blended Remote Learning Day Plans. This summary includes a list of the mandatory components of such plans as well as associated requirements placed on districts under the law. The summary notes that Remote and Blended Remote Learning Day Plans may also be met through a district’s implementation of an E-learning program. ISBE recommends that districts create Transition Planning teams and also notes that it will be releasing updated Remote Learning Recommendations soon.

COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES

The guidance emphasizes the importance of frequent and open communication by districts with students and families as they engage in the transition to in-person instruction and/or Remote and Blended Remote Learning Days including communication with families in their native languages to the greatest extent possible. ISBE is encouraging districts to provide in-person instruction for all students—especially for students with 504s/IEPs, English Learners, and those under the age of 13—to reduce the need for additional child care which can potentially expose children to an increased number of people and thereby lessen the impact of strategies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, it is recommended that districts post signs and messages reinforcing safety precautions and promoting protective measures in highly visible locations throughout their facilities. Districts should also post signage, in multiple languages, outside of main entryways noting:

- a. That persons may not enter the building if they have any currently known symptoms of COVID-19;
- b. A 6-foot distance from other must be maintained as much as possible;
- c. Face covering must be worn at all times; and
- d. Engaging in any physical contact is prohibited in school buildings.

To assist with the recommended communications, ISBE notes that districts may benefit from use of an intake form to assess each student's social and emotional needs. The guidance contains a sample of such a form as an appendix.

BLENDING REMOTE LEARNING DAYS

Where districts are unable to comply with IDPH requirements for returning to in-person instruction, they can rely upon Remote and Blended Remote Learning Days in accordance with recently passed legislation. When developing Remote and Blended Remote Learning Day Plans, ISBE is directing districts to place a *"high priority"* on providing in-person instruction to students with IEPs, 504 Plans, and/or who receive English language support as well as consider prioritization of in-person instruction for students under age 13 and those who had greater difficulty learning remotely in spring 2020. School teams may also consider whether and when students have employment. School teams should consider appropriate instruction for special education students, and relevant transition supports for students receiving 504 accommodations, English language services, and students having specific health concerns and identified learning or social emotional needs.

ISBE is also advising districts to consider individuals who are at a higher risk for severe illness if exposed to COVID-19 as part of their return to in-person instruction. Districts, in consultation with appropriate medical professionals, may need to develop safe alternatives to in-person instruction for those who are medically fragile, at higher risk, or live with individuals at higher risk—including the potential for continued remote instruction. In furtherance of this consideration, ISBE recommends that districts provide dedicated time for nurses to meet, individually, with teachers and staff members to review concerns related to medically high-risk students returning to in-person instruction

Where schools are engaged in in-person instruction, it is advisable to use alternative means of instruction to mitigate the potential spread of COVID-19. Examples provided include teachers, rather than students, moving between classrooms or providing virtual presentation of lessons to students in different classrooms.

STUDENT AND STAFF ATTENDANCE

Students should be expected to attend and engage in school daily—whether in-person or remotely. Districts are encouraged to make daily contact with all students and families, especially those not in attendance or engaging in class. Furthermore, Districts are required to discontinue practices/rewards that encourage perfect attendance or would discourage individuals from staying at home when they are ill.

ISBE recommends that districts prepare to mitigate the effects of potential increases in teacher absenteeism using the following considerations:

1. Hiring additional subs,
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2. Providing professional development to improve blended learning or online learning for both, and
3. Implementing team teaching or co-teaching models.

CALENDAR CONSIDERATIONS

Districts may consider amending school calendars to compensate for a potential resurgence of the virus in the fall. For example, ISBE recommends Districts consider using a model employed by several colleges and universities whereby classes start on an earlier date and end by November. An additional ISBE suggestion includes a year-round school year with the 2021 summer break dispersed in smaller increments.

INSTRUCTIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

ISBE's guidance provides detailed explanation of various instructional steps districts can take in response to and to combat the effects of COVID-19. The instructional guidance pertaining to students discusses districts' assessment of students' skill levels and addressing learning loss, vertical grade level articulation, instructional best practices for maintaining social distancing and back to school events, considerations for early childhood education, special education and English learners, as well as guidance related to grading. The guidance also contains instructional recommendations related to faculty and staff including use of new teacher mentorship programs, professional learning and staffing, as well as utilizing teacher leaders, statewide coaches, and technology.

HEALTH AND SAFETY PROTOCOLS IDPH GUIDANCE

ISBE recommends that districts proactively prepare their staff and students to prevent the spread of COVID-19. To do so, it is recommended that districts provide training on health and safety protocols in accordance with IDPH and CDC guidance prior to resuming in-person instruction. The guidance provides individualized summaries of best practices recommended by IDPH and CDC to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (e.g., social distancing, use of face coverings, student and staff screening or certifications, hand and respiratory hygiene) as well as summaries of how to mitigate the spread in certain school-specific scenarios (e.g., related services, physical education, band, health offices, visitor restrictions). Overall, it is important for districts to remain up to date on current IDPH and CDC guidance through frequent monitoring of such guidance to best protect students and staff from the spread of COVID-19.

For assistance with interpreting ISBE's guidance and developing plans related thereto, please contact your Robbins Schwartz attorney.