



SAFE RETURN TO SCHOOL UPDATES

2023-2024

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GCS Safe Return to School 2023-2024

Safe Return to School



Guilford County Schools is working closely with Guilford County Public Health and other public health experts, such as the [ABC Science Collaborative](#), to make decisions based on the best scientific evidence and guidance available. Our commitment is to follow the most updated health protocols to keep our community as safe as possible.

Guilford County Schools is also working with Guilford County Public Health to track COVID-19 cases and report them to the public.

Our **approach to safety** includes a **layered approach to protecting students, staff, and visitors**. The layers are recommended by public health officials, and they are designed to work together so that if one prevention strategy is not available, another layer is there to back it up and help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

For more information, click [here](#) for the GCS Safe Return to School Updates 2023.

The dashboard linked [here](#) displays data related to COVID-19 in Guilford County Schools and reflects information confirmed by the Guilford County Health Department.

What's new? – Changes in Health Protocols – Effective Sept. 30, 2023

- Per the most current NCDHHS guidance, **only those who test positive or have symptoms of COVID-19 must stay home from school**. Students or staff with positive COVID-19 test results or symptoms must stay home for **five (5) days** from the date the sample was collected for a positive COVID-19 test if they are not experiencing symptoms or for five days from the first day of symptoms. The Guilford County Department of Public Health is ending contact tracing protocols in accordance with the most [current state guidance for public schools](#). Principals will continue reporting positive cases of COVID-19 to public health and notify parents and staff if a cluster of linked cases occurs at their school(s).
- As approved by the Board of Education, face coverings/masks are optional in all GCS schools and facilities. As needed, staff meetings and other gatherings may be held in person. Virtual and hybrid meetings are also encouraged.
- GCS campuses will welcome volunteers and visitors to campus following normal protocols for invitations, background checks, and sign-in. Parents may visit by making an appointment.
- Water fountains may reopen. Students may continue using water bottles and bottle-filling stations provided in each school to refill them.

What's staying the same? – Health Protocols



- Field trip requests will continue to be allowed, and trips will follow the safety guidelines of the host location.
- Requests for community use of indoor facilities will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.
- As student enrollment and physical spaces vary greatly by school, principals will determine how meals will be handled at their schools, including the use of cafeterias.
- GCS will continue deliveries of cleaning supplies to schools, and schools may request additional supplies as needed.
- Isolation rooms and protocols will continue.
- Cleaning is completed daily and after a positive COVID-19 case has been confirmed in a facility in alignment with NCDHHS and CDC guidelines.
- There are no capacity limits/physical distancing requirements on school buses. Elementary students may ride three students per bench seat while secondary school students may ride two students per bench seat.

Guilford County Schools Protocols

Q. How will GCS protect the health of students, staff and visitors this school year?

A. GCS follows the health [protocols](#) recommended for public schools by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS). GCS also seeks guidance from [ABC Science Collaborative](#) and exchanges information and ideas regularly with educational leaders from leading school systems and organizations across North Carolina and nationally.

In alignment with the guidance issued for schools by NCDHHS and the [U.S. Centers for Disease Prevention and Infection Control \(CDC\)](#), GCS uses multiple prevention strategies that act as layers of protection for students, staff and visitors. The layers are designed to work together so that if one prevention strategy is not available or does not stop the virus, another layer remains to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Examples include frequent handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue or elbow, daily cleaning, providing hand sanitizer, etc.

When NCDHHS or CDC guidelines for schools are updated, GCS updates its protocols accordingly.

Q. How has GCS updated its guidelines for the 2023-2024 school year?

A. As public health officials have learned more about what causes COVID-19 and have identified what prevention strategies work best, their recommendations and protocols change accordingly. Protocols are also adapted by public health officials as COVID-19 cases rise and fall or as new variants emerge. Here's a quick overview of what's new and what's staying the same for the spring semester of the 2023-2024 school year.

Q. What other guidelines remain in place?

A. Current GCS health protocols are outlined briefly below; all protocols are subject to change as public health recommendations shift based on new information and research.

Masking Guidance



Optional masking for all students and staff.

It is up to each individual to choose to wear a mask or not when in GCS buildings.

Q. Why did GCS stop requiring universal masking indoors?

A. The Guilford County Board of Education voted on February 21, 2022, to shift to masks being optional for all GCS students, staff and visitors indoors.

The school board based its decision on the decline in COVID-19 cases and the recommendation of Governor Cooper to make masking optional in public schools across North Carolina. Local public health officials indicate that vaccination is now the most important safety strategy for preventing the spread of COVID-19 and reducing serious illness. The [ABC Science Collaborative](#) has also indicated that local school districts should make their own determinations regarding masking.

The Guilford County Board of Education will continue to base its decisions on science and the best advice of public health officials as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve. All protocols, including masks being optional, are subject to change based on new information and research in the future.

Q. Can staff and students continue to wear masks in GCS schools and offices?

A. Yes. Masks are still considered to be a safe, helpful strategy for preventing the spread of all respiratory illnesses. Public health officials continue to recommend them for use by those with symptoms, those with compromised immune systems, and those who want to reduce their risk of spreading illness.

Q. Will GCS require my child to wear a mask if I want them to continue to wear one?

A. No. The decision to wear a mask is up to each individual, and GCS does not have the ability to enforce preferences.

Physical Distancing Guidance



Q. What are the physical distancing protocols?

A. Locker rooms/Gymnasiums/Cafeteriums

Student use of locker rooms and lockers for PE and athletics is allowed. Schools should avoid having all classes use the locker rooms at the same time, if possible. School personnel should also minimize the time students spend changing clothes (ideally, less than 15 minutes) and will help ensure consistent use of masking inside the locker rooms.

Visual Cues

Classroom posters will encourage and reinforce the importance of handwashing/ hand sanitizing and respiratory etiquette.

Staff meetings

Staff meetings and other gatherings may be held in person. Virtual and hybrid meetings are still encouraged when appropriate.

Transportation Guidance



Q. What are the GCS protocols for bus riders?

A. Parents/guardians may not board GCS school buses.

The transportation department will ensure that bus drivers have adequate supplies on school buses, including disinfecting wipes and other cleaning supplies.

Physical distance and capacity limits on school buses have been removed and are no longer required by NCDHHS or the CDC. GCS will return to its pre-pandemic school bus seating of three students per bench seat at the elementary school level and two students per bench seat at the middle and high school levels.

Student Guidance



Q. Have the health protocols for students entering the building changed since last year?

A. No. Schools should follow their typical procedures for exclusion as they would for any type of illness if a child is symptomatic at school.

Parents/guardians are encouraged to monitor their children's symptoms and keep them home if they have a fever or are ill. NCDHHS recommends "that families refer children to diagnostic testing who exhibit symptoms of COVID-19."

Students should remain home until they are symptom- and fever-free for at least 24 hours without the aid of fever-reducing medicine.

Q. Will students who travel (not with the school system) internationally and/or out of state quarantine prior to coming to school?

A. Possibly, depending on the location of travel. Please [click here for CDC travel advisories](#) and here for [advisories pertaining to COVID-19](#).

Q. Will voluntary, after-school activities continue this year?

A. Yes. Unless otherwise indicated or restricted by local or state public health directives, executive orders by the Governor or GCS Board of Education directives, all voluntary, after-school activities are resuming this year. This includes middle and high school sports, clubs and other extracurricular or co-curricular activities.

Special events and performances with spectators (parents and family members), in-person meetings and spring events may proceed. All protocols and safety guidance will continue to be evaluated as the public health situation evolves.

Q. Is ACES continuing this year? What are the health protocols for ACES?

A. Yes, ACES will continue service this year at schools where parent/guardian interest is sufficient to support the program. ACES will follow all GCS health protocols and will adhere to the recommendations from the NCDHHS and CDC, as indicated throughout this document.

Q. Are there any other protocols for students participating in visual and performing arts during the school day or as part of their extracurricular activities?

A. No. Visual and performing arts classes will follow the overall GCS health protocol.

Employee Guidance



Q. Will employee temperature checks and health attestations be required?

A. Employee temperature checks and health attestations (via paper or CrisisGo) are no longer required or advised prior to building entry by the NCDHHS or CDC. This change became effective in GCS on August 9, 2021.

However, employees should stay home if they are sick or have any COVID-19 symptoms. Employees should contact their healthcare providers for additional guidance when feeling ill. Employees should check with human resources for guidance regarding leave.

Q. Will GCS staff be required to submit information regarding their vaccination status and/or submit proof that they have been vaccinated against COVID-19?

A. No. GCS staff are not required to submit proof of vaccination against COVID-19.

Q. I am a GCS employee and I am waiting for a COVID-19 test result, what should I do?

A. If you are experiencing symptoms, notify your supervisor and stay home until you receive notice that the test is negative. If you receive notice that it is positive, contact your supervisor and your healthcare provider for guidance. You may also be contacted by public health.

Employees who do not have symptoms do not need to quarantine following possible exposure to COVID-19. Public health recommends testing five (5) days following exposure. Testing too early can skew your results.

Q. I am an employee and someone in my household has tested positive for COVID-19. Should I come to work?

A. If you are feeling sick, stay home and follow the isolation guidance below. If you do not have symptoms, follow the close contact guidance below.

Isolation – Positive for COVID-19 – Regardless of Vaccination Status

- Stay home for five (5) days
- After five (5) days if asymptomatic or symptoms are resolving, they can leave isolation. After the isolation period, a mask should be worn when around others at home and in the community for 5 days in addition to masks being required at all times when in GCS buildings.
- Testing to return is not needed

Close Contact with a Person with a Positive Test for COVID-19

- No quarantine period is required
- Test on day five (5)
- Masks should be worn when around others at home and in the community for 10 days in addition to masks being required at all times when in GCS buildings.

Q. I am a GCS employee. Will I have to use my sick leave if I become ill with COVID-19?

A. The state school board's contagious disease policy will cover employees who are required to isolate/quarantine at the direction of public health officials due to confirmed or presumed COVID-19 exposure. Employees should use sick leave if they become ill with COVID-19 beyond the dates listed by public health officials.

Q. I'm an employee. How do I request an accommodation?

A. Contact Benefits in Human Resources for additional information about the process and any documentation that is required.



Health and Hygiene Guidance

Q. Will water fountains be available for use?

A. Water fountains may be used as determined by each school's leadership. Students can continue to bring water bottles to school and use the water bottle filling stations provided by the district as needed.

Q. Will bathroom sinks and stalls be used?

A. All bathroom sinks, and stalls will be available for use.

Q. What is the hand hygiene protocol at GCS?

A. All students/staff should wash and sanitize their hands frequently. Other guidelines include:

- Using soap and water to wash hands for 20 seconds throughout the day.
- Using bottles of hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol) in classrooms or when sinks are not available in the classroom.

Q. What is the respiratory etiquette protocol at GCS?

A. The shift toward optional masks does not change etiquette for preventing the spread of illnesses, including COVID-19. Respiratory etiquette includes covering coughs and sneezes with tissues or using elbows if tissues are not available.



Cleaning Guidance

Q. What are the cleaning and disinfecting protocols at GCS?

A. In alignment with [CDC](#) guidelines, GCS uses EPA-approved products to clean schools and school buses daily.

Cleaning refers to the use of soap and water while disinfecting refers to using a fluid or chemical that further removes viral particles – including COVID-19 – from surfaces.

Per the CDC,

“In general, cleaning once a day is usually enough to sufficiently remove potential virus that may be on surfaces. Disinfecting (using disinfectants on the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency COVID-19 list](#)) removes any remaining germs on surfaces, which further reduces any risk of spreading infection.”

If a facility has had a sick person or someone who tested positive for COVID-19 within the last 24 hours, GCS custodial staff clean and disinfect the space.

In addition, GCS will clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces daily. Cafeteria tables will be wiped down and disinfected in between use and/or in between school use/ACES use and following ACES.

School buses will be cleaned and disinfected prior to and after completing routes each day.

GCS continues to follow local, state and federal health and sanitation requirements for school nutrition programs. Other routine cleanings will be conducted daily; however, manipulatives and student/classroom/media center materials do not need to be cleaned in between uses.

After a COVID-positive case has been confirmed by Public Health, maintenance staff and/or the principal will contact the lead custodian to clean and disinfect any affected spaces in alignment with CDC protocols using EPA-approved cleaning fluids and disinfectant.

GCS custodians will clean and disinfect affected areas within 24 hours of identification of a positive COVID-19 case. If an individual has been present at the school/work site and prior to student/worker use/arrival or if an individual has not been present for more than 24 hours, additional cleaning and disinfecting is not recommended or required, per the CDC; and in these situations, routine cleaning will be sufficient.



Parent/Community Engagement Guidance

Q. Are field trips allowed?

A. Yes. Field trip requests will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis in accordance with GCS Board Policies and Regulations. Students and staff on approved field trips will follow the COVID-19 safety protocols of the host location.

Q. Are parents allowed in buildings?

A. Yes. Parents may visit schools by contacting the main office and following school sign-in protocols. To avoid disrupting learning time, parents should make an appointment to speak with a teacher or school administrator.

[Individuals who wish to volunteer can learn more about the requirements by clicking here.](#)

Q. Are visitors and volunteers allowed?

A. Yes. Visitors and volunteers are allowed in GCS schools and buildings. As always, visitors and volunteers must follow school protocols for making an appointment.

Volunteers may be invited as part of the instructional program.

[See our Volunteers site for more information.](#)

Q. Is Community Access of Facilities allowed?

A. Yes. Beginning in January 2022, indoor facility use requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis for organizations based on GCS Board Policies and Regulations.



COVID-19 Guidance

Q. My child doesn't feel well. I think it's just a cold or allergies. Can he or she come to school?

A. No. COVID-19 mimics common cold and flu symptoms, and we also want to limit the spread of other illnesses. To keep everyone safe, please keep your child at home if they are sick until they are symptom- and fever-free for at least 24 hours without the aid of fever-reducing medicine. Public health authorities updated the requirements for COVID-19 isolation as of January 3, 2022:

Positive for or showing symptoms of COVID-19 (Isolation) – Regardless of Vaccination Status

- Stay home for five (5) days
- After five (5) days if asymptomatic or symptoms are resolving, they can return to school. After the isolation period, a mask should be worn when around others at home and in the community for five days in addition to masks being required at all times when in GCS buildings.
- Testing to return is not needed

Q. Are COVID-19 and the flu comparable illnesses?

A. No. While both are respiratory illnesses, COVID-19 spreads faster than the flu. A major worry right now is that the current variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus are highly contagious. While the [Omicron variant](#) of COVID-19 is **highly contagious**, it appears to cause less serious illness, particularly for [fully vaccinated/boosted individuals, per public health officials](#). While fully vaccinated/boosted individuals can get infected with the Omicron variant, they are **less likely to experience severe illness, hospitalization and death**, per public health officials. Compared to the flu, COVID-19 can cause more serious illnesses in some people. COVID-19 can also take longer before people show symptoms and people can be contagious for longer.

People can be infected with both the flu and the virus that causes COVID-19 at the same time and have symptoms of both influenza and COVID-19. Testing is needed to tell what the illness is and to confirm a diagnosis.

Q. I am a parent/guardian and I have tested positive for COVID-19, or someone in my household has tested positive, and my child lives with me. Can my child come to school?

A. Your child may attend school as long as they do not get sick. They should follow the isolation protocols if they do become ill.

- No quarantine period is required
- Test on day five
- Masks should be worn when around others at home and in the community for 10 days in addition to masks being required at all times when in GCS buildings.

Q. What happens if a student/staff member becomes ill at school?

A. GCS has a protocol with defined steps that all schools and district offices must follow when a student or staff member becomes ill at school, has been exposed to COVID-19 or has symptoms. The protocol is aligned with guidance from the NCDHHS and CDC.

If a student has a fever or is exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms during the school day, the student will be sent to the isolation room. From there, the principal will contact the student’s family and release the student to the parent/guardian. If appropriate, the principal will also provide an isolation letter.

Staff members who are ill, have a fever or exhibiting symptoms are sent home or isolated until their transportation home arrives.

Q. Are contact tracing and case investigations continuing in GCS?

A. No. Beginning on February 21, 2022, contact tracing in K-12 settings is no longer recommended by the state of North Carolina. GCS administrators will continue to immediately report any confirmed cases of COVID-19 among students or staff to public health officials. District staff meets regularly with local public health officials to share data and address any concerns.

Q. When can students or staff return to school or work?

A. Per Guilford County Public Health, as of January 3, 2022, isolation is required for five days from the date a positive test result was received, the onset of symptoms or possible exposure to someone with a confirmed case of COVID-19. If testing is completed, students and staff may return to school if testing was negative and an alternate diagnosis provided by a healthcare provider explains the symptoms. If they have experienced symptoms of illness, students and staff can return to school five days after exposure or the onset of symptoms *and* when they have been symptom and fever-free for at least 24 hours without using fever-reducing medications.

For helpful information on children and COVID-19, visit the NCDHHS [website](#).

Q. What is the *notification process* if there’s a COVID-19 case at my child’s school?

A. Principals/supervisors will notify all parents/guardians whose children become ill at school. Principals also inform public health of all confirmed positive cases.

GCS will continue to work with the Department of Public Health to offer data on positive cases in our schools through our *COVID-19 data dashboards* online. Although this information is updated regularly, lag times can occur while waiting for test results or other confirmation of suspected cases.

When GCS is informed by Public Health of a confirmed cluster (five or more epidemiologically linked cases), parents and staff members at the affected school will be notified by the principal, typically via the district's mass notification system. Clusters are also reported by public health to the state and are posted on the *NCDHHS [website](#)*.

Q. Is GCS sharing information about confirmed/verified cases of COVID-19 among students and staff at all schools and district facilities?

A. Yes. While contact tracing is no longer recommended, the district publishes coronavirus data dashboards that show staff, student and athletics-related cases. Only cases that affect a GCS school or facility AND have been confirmed by public health are posted. These dashboards are updated daily during the workweek. Click [here](#) to access the dashboards.

Q. What other steps are being taken to keep students and staff healthy and safe?

A. In addition to the protocols outlined above, GCS continues to partner with local public health officials and healthcare providers in offering vaccinations and booster shots at school sites and in sharing public health information regarding vaccinations, vaccination clinics, COVID-19 and other pandemic-related news and information.

The district also offers information sessions via Guilford Parent Academy. Families can also tune into GCSTV or follow the district's social media channels, which include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X) and YouTube.

GCS also maintains an ongoing partnership with the ABC Science Collaborative and regularly seeks guidance from other similarly situated school districts and communities across North Carolina and nationally as well as national experts and professional groups and associations.

District curriculum resources have digital licenses and can be embedded into Canvas courses. Ongoing training and integration support for teachers will be provided by the district's Blended Learning department.

Vaccination Guidance



Q. Where can I get vaccinated against COVID-19?

A. You can go to [NCDHHS](#), enter your zip code and follow the prompts.

[Guilford County](#) is currently offering COVID-19 vaccines at community locations. You may schedule an appointment [online](#) or by Phone at (336) 641-7944.

You may print or view a copy of your vaccination card from [NCDHHS](#). The NC COVID-19 Vaccine Portal is a free, fast and secure way for many North Carolinians to present proof of COVID-19 vaccination or print a copy of your COVID-19 vaccine information for other purposes.

Q. Are COVID-19 vaccinations safe?

A. Public health officials recommend vaccination against COVID-19 for all eligible individuals ages five and over. Research indicates that COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. Current COVID-19 vaccines protect you against severe illness, hospitalization and death. You may have side effects after vaccination. These are normal and should go away in a few days.

Q. Is the vaccine safe for children and teenagers?

A. Millions of children and youth ages 5+ and tens of millions of adults in the United States have received COVID-19 vaccines under the most intense safety monitoring in U.S. history.

Young people, like adults, may have some temporary reactions, such as a sore arm, feeling tired or achy for a day or two, headache or fever. These are normal and good signs that their body is building protection, and they should go away in a few days.

Parents/caregivers can enroll their child in v-safe, a free, smartphone-based tool that uses text messaging and web surveys to provide personalized health check-ins. Through [v-safe](#), you can report any side effects your child may have after vaccination.

There is no safety data indicating that the COVID-19 vaccines impact children's development or their ability to get pregnant in the future.

Young people can get other vaccines at the same time, or around the same time, as the COVID-19 vaccine.

The NC Pediatric Society, along with the North Carolina Medical Society (NCMS) and the North Carolina Academy of Family Physicians, strongly encourage all families to ensure children and youth ages five and older are vaccinated as soon as possible against COVID-19. Read more from these organizations [here](#).

Q. Are COVID-19 vaccinations FDA-approved?

A. On August 23, 2021, the FDA approved the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for people 16 and over. FDA has authorized COVID-19 vaccines for emergency use (EUA):

- Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine (authorized for people 5 to 15 years of age)
- Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine (authorized for people 18 and over)
- Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 Vaccine (authorized for people 18 and over)

Q. Are COVID-19 vaccinations required by the State of North Carolina for school entry and enrollment?

A. No. North Carolina has not mandated COVID-19 vaccinations for eligible students for school entry or as a condition of enrollment.

Q. Are COVID-19 vaccinations required by GCS for all employees?

A. No. However, GCS does require employees to submit information regarding their vaccination status to the district for planning purposes and requires vaccinated employees to submit proof that they are fully vaccinated.

Q. Will COVID-19 vaccinations give me breast cancer or cause infertility?

A. According to the CDC, there is no evidence that female or male fertility problems are a side effect of any vaccine, including COVID-19 vaccines.

Resources



Q. Where can I go to get credible research and information regarding COVID-19?

- [Guilford County Department of Public Health and Human Services](#)
- [Guilford County COVID-19 data](#)
- [ABC Science Research Collaborative](#)
- [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction](#)
- [COVID-19 North Carolina dashboard](#)
- [CDC Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools](#)
- [CDC data tracker](#)
- [CDC contact tracing and case investigation](#)