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Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

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Commissioner of Health

February 11, 2021

Dear School Superintendents:

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude for your hard work and dedication in keeping Rockland's schools safe and in partnering with us on COVID-19 case and contact investigations

I would also like to share some good news with you. COVID-19 surveillance data indicate that the measures being taken in Rockland schools have been effective in reducing the risk of disease transmission. Indeed, it has become apparent that activities outside of schools pose a greater risk of transmission than activities inside schools.[‡]

In response to the latest findings, we have updated our guidelines to allow more students and staff the opportunity to avoid quarantine and remain in school following a school/classroom exposure provided that certain criteria are met. Up until this point, our policy has been that students in school are considered *contacts* and are required to quarantine if they were within the same room as a case for any period. This policy was enacted to be protective of students and staff and to simplify the reporting process. However, given the above data, we have concluded that this more open definition of *contact* may not be necessary in all cases.

A *close contact* is defined by NYSDOH as someone who was within six feet of an infectious COVID-19 case for 10 or more minutes cumulatively in a 24-hour period, regardless of mask usage or plastic desk shields. Schools will be able to utilize this narrower definition **if and only if** the RCDOH has determined that the school has supplied satisfactory information regarding any in-school exposure. Here are the provisions of the new policy:

- If a COVID-19 exposure occurs in a classroom, schools **MUST** provide a **roster and seating chart** of the students and staff who were located within 6 feet of the case (during their infectious period) for 10 minutes or more (cumulative within a 24-hour period).
- Schools must also be able to establish that the entire class was observing proper masking and social distancing protocols **AND** that the case did not migrate throughout the classroom at the time of exposure.
- In situations where the case and surrounding students and/or staff are not masked or not able to mask such as at lunch or gym class, we would consider individuals within 12 feet of the case to be close contacts. If the school is unable to confirm that the individual stayed in one place, or

that he or she was within 12 feet of students and staff outside of a strict seating chart, then previous quarantine protocols will still apply, and the entire room will need to be placed on quarantine.

- If a school is unable to identify persons sitting within a 6-foot perimeter of a case on a bus, the entire bus would be subject to quarantine.

Our department will conduct a thorough review of every case with school point-of-contacts and make a final determination regarding who is exposed. It is our first duty to limit the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. Therefore, if based on the available information, our department believes that students and staff were in fact exposed, it is our duty to place those students and staff on quarantine per existing COVID-19 protocols.

You no longer need to call us to report cases but instead should email the exposure information by secure email, using the attached Excel template, which includes instructions, to: RCDPC@co.rockland.ny.us. This will allow contacts to be more quickly integrated into our contact tracing system.

We thank the staff at each school district for your tireless dedication to ensuring that education in Rockland is provided safely during this difficult time. Together we will meet the challenges presented by this ever-changing pandemic.

Citations

1. Honein MA, Barrios LC, Brooks JT. Data and Policy to Guide Opening Schools Safely to Limit the Spread of SARS-CoV-2 Infection. *JAMA*. Published online January 26, 2021. doi:10.1001/jama.2021.0374

Very truly yours,



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