

Contact Tracing for COVID-19 in K-12 Schools: How to Prepare and What to Expect

As of August 4, 2020

Parents, children, teachers, school nurses, staff, and administrators all play an important role in working with the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) to prevent COVID-19 from entering the school setting and help slow transmission of COVID-19 in our communities. Everyone should monitor their health while COVID-19 is present in the community and should not attend school or other activities if they are ill or if they know they have been exposed to someone with COVID-19.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF SOMEONE IS DIAGNOSED WITH COVID-19?

When a person has a positive test for COVID-19 or is diagnosed with COVID-19 by their doctor, the doctor is required by law to report the diagnosis or positive test to VDH. Reporting this information to VDH allows public health experts (called “case investigators”) to reach out to the person with COVID-19 to provide education and to obtain information about others who might have been exposed. If the person with COVID-19 is aged 17 or younger, the case investigator will speak to the parent or guardian.

When case investigators from the local health department (LHD) first reach out to people reported to have COVID-19, they will:

- Verify and request additional demographic information

Example question: *“Can you please verify your name (or your child’s name) and date of birth?”*

- Provide education about COVID-19 and ask about any symptoms or underlying conditions the person might have

Example question: *“Did symptoms require you (or your child) to go to the hospital?”*

- Review isolation recommendations and other resources

Example question: *Example question: “What would home isolation look like? What concerns do you have?”*

- Conduct contact tracing to identify any close contacts who may have been exposed

Example question: *“Did you (or your child) share food or drinks with anyone in the 2 days before they felt sick or while they felt sick? Did you (or your child) sit next to someone on the bus in the 2 days before they felt sick or while they felt sick?”*

The case investigator will not:

- Ask for your (or your child’s) social security number, immigration status, or financial information.
- Share your (or your child’s) name or identity with any close contacts.

People who are in isolation should stay home until it is safe for them to be around others. In the home, anyone sick or infected should separate themselves as much as possible from others by staying in a

specific “sick room” or area and using a separate bathroom, if available. Those with COVID-19 who had symptoms can be with others and return to activities after all of the following have happened: 24 hours with no fever (without the use of fever reducing medications like acetaminophen or ibuprofen) AND improved symptoms AND when 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared. Those with COVID-19 who never had any symptoms can be with others and return to activities after 10 days have passed since the positive COVID-19 test.

WHAT TYPE OF INFORMATION MIGHT THE LOCAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT ASK THE SCHOOL?

If someone with COVID-19 is identified who attends or works in a school setting, the LHD may reach out to the school to gather additional information. The name and identity of the person with COVID-19 will not be shared with the school or confirmed by the LHD. The LHD will request specific information based on their interview with the person with COVID-19, or that person’s guardian. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be extremely important that schools prepare by having information readily available. Requested information may include:

- The total number of students and staff at the facility
- The total number of students and staff in a particular grade or classroom
- Class schedules or rosters for a particular grade or classroom
- Class seating charts for a particular grade or classroom
- Prevention measures in place in a particular grade or classroom (e.g., desk spacing, room capacity)
- Bus assignments for a particular bus route
- Contact information for students and staff
- Information about other particular groups a person with COVID-19 may have spent significant time with (e.g., an athletic team, a school club, after-school care)
- Information about students or staff who recently reported illness:
 - Symptoms
 - Dates of onset
 - Locations in the facility where people with reported illness spend time

HOW WILL THE SCHOOL COMMUNICATE WITH STUDENTS, PARENTS/GUARDIANS, AND STAFF?

The LHD will encourage the school to notify parents/guardians, students and staff about the situation while maintaining confidentiality. The LHD can assist with template letters and fact sheets.

HOW WILL THE LOCAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT REACH OUT TO CLOSE CONTACTS?

WHAT WILL THEY ASK?

Public health experts (called “contact tracers”) at the LHD will use the information obtained by the case interview and any additional information provided by the school to identify people who had close contact with the person with COVID-19 while they were contagious. If the close contacts are aged 17 or younger, the contact tracers will speak to the parent or guardian.

A close contact includes anyone who spent more than 15 minutes within six feet of the person with COVID-19 or had exposure to the person’s respiratory secretions (for example, coughed or sneezed

on; shared a drinking glass or utensils; kissing) while they were contagious. A person with COVID-19 is considered to be contagious starting 2 days before they became sick, or 2 days before they tested positive if they never had symptoms.

Depending on the classroom setting, prevention measures implemented in the school (e.g., reduced class size, separation of desks), and the age of the children and their activities at school, it may be very difficult to determine whether or not children meet the close contact definition. If a person with COVID-19 is identified in a class of young children who have trouble keeping six feet of distance from one another, the entire classroom may be considered a close contact. If a person with COVID-19 is identified in a high school student or in a teacher/faculty member, they may be able to provide more detailed information about their activities and interactions, such that fewer people might fall into this close contact category.

When contact tracers reach out to those identified as close contacts, they will:

- Verify and request additional demographic information

Example question: *“Can you please verify your name (or your child’s name) and date of birth?”*

- Provide education about COVID-19 and ask about any symptoms the individual might have

Example question: *“Do you know the symptoms of COVID-19? Are you (or is your child) currently experiencing any of these symptoms?”*

- Recommend testing, if available, and provide resources for locating testing locations

Example question: *“Do you have a plan for where to go to get yourself (or your child) tested?”*

- Enroll the contact in a monitoring and reporting tool called “Sara Alert” which will allow the LHD to check on the person every day regarding their symptoms, and connect them to care if needed

Example question: *“Did you (or your child) have a fever today or experience any other symptoms?”*

- Review quarantine recommendations, an end date for the quarantine period, and other resources

Example question: *Example question: “What would home quarantine look like? What concerns do you have?”*

The contact tracer will not:

- Confirm the name or identity of the person with COVID-19
- Ask for you or your child’s social security number, immigration status, or financial information
- Come to your home to perform testing

Close contacts of someone with COVID-19 should quarantine (stay home) and monitor their health for 14 days, starting from the most recent day they were possibly exposed to COVID-19. It is recommended that all close contacts also be tested, if testing is available, to quickly identify if they are contagious. If tested and the result is positive, the person is considered to have COVID-19 and should isolate (stay home) and avoid unnecessary contact with anyone else. If tested and the result is negative, the close contacts will still need to complete the full original 14 day quarantine. Contacts of contacts do not need to quarantine.

WHAT WILL THE SCHOOL DO IF A PERSON WITH COVID-19 IS IDENTIFIED? WILL IT CLOSE?

The LHD will work with the school to review measures in place to limit the spread of disease and may

recommend additional measures or modifications to current activities. Depending on the additional information provided, such measures might include increased cleaning, temporary closure of certain classrooms or areas and possibly temporary closure of the school building.

Closure might be recommended if students or staff who have tested positive for COVID-19 or who have symptoms of COVID-19 are identified in multiple groups, grades, or classes throughout the school. If school building closure is recommended, the recommended time frame for suspension of school operations is 14 days. After 14 days have passed, the school building could reopen for children and staff who have no signs or symptoms of COVID-19 and who have not had recent close contact with someone with COVID-19.