

ACTL - School Health Advisory Board Recommendations

Executive Summary

The APS School Health Advisory Board (SHAB) has followed national guidelines and Superintendent Durán's return-to-school plans closely as this unprecedented public health crisis directly aligns with our mission to advise APS on the development and evaluation of school health policies and programs, including health and physical education, the school environment, and health services. SHAB members met bi-weekly in the fall and monthly since the winter, with 20-25 members engaged in each meeting. The following recommendations are the result of this committee.

Implement Outdoor Lunch as the Primary Venue for Safe Dining

Indoor dining is widely recognized as a high-risk activity. In its school guidance, the CDC states that "eating meals outside is best," and recommends having students eat outdoors or in classrooms as much as possible. Not only is outdoor dining the safest practice during COVID-19, it also provides students with additional health and social-emotional benefits including fresh air, sunlight, screen breaks, and mental health breaks.

To ensure equity and safety, outdoor dining should be consistently implemented at all APS schools, on as many days as possible. Outdoor areas such as green space, playing fields, blacktops, sidewalks, or parking lots should be utilized at all schools. Equipment needs will be minimal in most weather conditions, as children and teens can easily sit on ground surfaces on most days. Schools will need appropriate resources to provide outdoor lunch in variable weather conditions. This could include covered shelters and low-cost outdoor seating options (e.g., foam stadium pads, yoga mats). APS should provide these types of resources to schools as soon as possible. Universal county-wide access to outdoor dining should be a basic health/safety mitigation measure that is **not** dependent on school-specific access to equipment, principal preference, or PTA resources.

While outdoor dining should be the primary option, alternative plans are needed for days when weather conditions are not safe (e.g., high wind, thunderstorms, below freezing temperatures, extreme heat, red alert air quality) or for schools that lack sufficient outdoor space. Indoor dining must also be available on a case-by-case basis as an accommodation for students who cannot eat outdoors, for instance, due to allergies or other health conditions.

According to CDC guidelines, classrooms should be used for indoor dining when possible instead of larger communal spaces. In fact, CDC guidelines state that dining halls should be closed down and instead used for masked instruction purposes.

In the event of classroom dining, lunch/staff monitors should ensure the proper implementation of food allergy safety accommodations for students with IEP or 504 medical plans. While eating indoors, students should be spaced at least 6 feet apart and grouped in designated/known cohorts (to facilitate contact tracing). Masks should be placed back on immediately after eating.

ACTL - School Health Advisory Board Recommendations

Executive Summary

Per CDC recommendations, indoor dining spaces should be provided with at least one of the following:

- Multiple exterior windows and doors that will remain open to improve outdoor air exchange,
- Upper room germicidal UV fixtures (some spaces will require more than one),
- Portable air cleaners with HEPA filtration (some spaces will require more than one).

Update APS Mask Policy to Require Universal Adherence

According to CDC guidance, masks should be worn at **ALL** times. The only exceptions should be for disability/medical exemption and eating/drinking. Current APS mask policy allows staff members to remove masks when alone in offices, or for instructional purposes. This does not align with the CDC's masking recommendation, which specifically states:

"Masks should be worn at all times, by all persons in school facilities, with exceptions for certain persons who, because of a disability, cannot wear a mask or wear a mask safely, or for certain settings such as while eating or drinking. Masks should be required in all classroom and non-classroom settings, including hallways, school offices, restrooms, gyms, auditoriums, etc."

Social-Emotional Learning

APS continues to offer Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) to students in a variety of delivery options, including integrated in-classroom lessons and during Monday's asynchronous learning. Receptivity to the Monday asynchronous SEL lessons appears to be poor among middle and high school students. Teachers who are successful engaging their students on these topics are guiding the students through the lesson and including class/group discussion, rather than simply assigning the asynchronous activity. Social-emotional lessons are also being delivered by school counselors at the elementary school level, with enthusiastic reception from students and teachers. SHAB would like to see more teacher facilitated SEL lessons and school counselor engagement, particularly in the middle and high schools.

Nevertheless, SHAB believes that distance learning is an inferior medium for social-emotional education, given the inherent lack of connectedness. To support social-emotional wellness and reduce the effects of isolation, SHAB recommends APS-coordinated in-person meet-ups outdoors so all students can have a periodic opportunity to reconnect with their teachers, counselors, and peers in a safe, structured environment. This is particularly important for the grades being promoted this year (6th, 8th, 12th).

Overuse of Screen time and Synchronous learning, without enough emphasis on Ergonomics

The return to school with a hybrid concurrent teaching model has not lessened screen time for most students, particularly middle and high schoolers. Expectations for time spent on synchronous versus asynchronous learning are not being met consistently across schools and

ACTL - School Health Advisory Board Recommendations

Executive Summary

grade levels. Less asynchronous time also means less time to complete “in class assignments,” which adds to the homework burden. Likewise, the amount of homework being assigned often exceeds parent expectations, particularly in high school, leading students to spend long days and nights on the computer trying to keep up.

Parents would like to see more off-screen reading of paper books, pen-to-paper writing, manipulatives, tactile art, outdoor observation, and other off-screen activities to keep students healthy and engaged.

There is a worldwide epidemic of myopia (near-sightedness) in children attributed to too much time spent indoors on near-screen activities. Adults and children are experiencing eye strain, dry eye disease, headaches, migraines, sleep disturbances, “tech neck,” depression, and other neurologic and orthopedic pathologies caused by excessive time spent on screens. Rates of overweight and obesity are also rising among children and youth during the pandemic, owing to excess sedentary time spent indoors and insufficient physical activity.

Extra efforts must be made to give students time away from their school devices to engage in physical activity and have outdoor breaks during the daytime. Teachers should lead their classes in periodic movement and stretching breaks during synchronous learning. APS and/or teachers should send parents and students recommendations periodically for maintaining a healthy ergonomic workspace for students. iPad stands should be issued along with detachable keyboards to maintain proper eye height.

**** Data Request****

SHAB would like to analyze the results of the upcoming vision and hearing screenings to compare to trends pre-pandemic. SHAB also encourages APS to collect Body Mass Index (BMI) data on all students to compare to national averages and pre-pandemic levels.

Outdoor Education

SHAB would like to see APS prioritize the development of outdoor learning spaces within our schoolyards. There are several community groups willing to support this effort financially and through volunteers.

Outdoor time with other students should not be reserved for students with the privilege of participating in competitive sports. All students, including those who selected virtual format, should have a periodic opportunity to reconnect with their teachers and peers in a safe, outdoor, structured environment. SHAB strongly encourages APS to plan and partner with community groups to maximize opportunities for outdoor student engagement at all grade levels.