

March 2, 2021

Re: School Health Advisory Board Return-to-School Recommendations

Dear School Board Members, Dr. Durán, and Senior Staff:

The APS School Health Advisory Board (SHAB) follows 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 education, the school environment, and health services.

Given the imminent return to school buildings for a majority of APS students and staff, we are providing recommendations to APS and School Health on universal access to **outdoor dining** and **universal mask usage**. In each recommendation, we urge APS to adhere to the recently updated Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, as well as all other applicable US Department of Education, Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and Virginia Department of Health (VDH) guidance, and to update the following plans immediately and accordingly:

- **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. In the meantime, while equipment is being sourced and funded, students can still go outside for lunch on most days.

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. 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.”

We understand that APS is allowing students and staff to wear self-provided masks, which we support, as this allows students and staff to select masks that are comfortable, breathable, and well-fitting. However, APS will need to establish a process and update its policy to ensure that masks adhere to CDC guidelines. Masks already purchased by APS should also comply with the new CDC guidelines.

The CDC recommends:

1. Making sure your mask fits snugly against your face.
 - Masks should completely cover the nose and mouth.
 - Masks should not have gaps near the eyes or sides of the face.

- Single KN95 masks may now be used (prior guidance stated not to use medical grade masks).
 - Masks with valves or vents should not be used.
2. Picking a mask with layers to keep your respiratory droplets in and others' out.
- Masks with layers can be accomplished by using:
 - one cloth mask with 2-3 layers; or
 - two masks - a disposable mask under a cloth mask (never two disposable masks together); or
 - a cloth mask with an inner filter pocket.

In closing, thank you for the important mitigation measures APS has already put into place. With the ever-changing nature of this pandemic, we appreciate the opportunity to share the collective feedback and knowledge of our engaged SHAB membership. We look forward to seeing progress in the above areas and we stand ready to assist APS as plans continue to develop. Please let us know if you have questions or would like to discuss any of these recommendations.

Sincerely,

Vera S. Cardinale, MPH
Chair, SHAB

REFERENCES

1. CDC rates indoor dining “higher risk,” even if socially-distanced: [Considerations for Restaurants and Bars | COVID-19](#) | [Summary of Guidance for Public Health Strategies to Address High Levels of Community Transmission of SARS-CoV-2](#) | [Is Dining Out Safe During COVID-19? – Health Essentials from Cleveland Clinic](#) | [700 epidemiologists rank indoor dining as the #1 “most risky” activity](#) | [CDC School Guidance on communal dining spaces](#)
2. Ventilation in Schools and Childcare Programs (CDC). Feb. 26, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/ventilation.html>
3. Operating schools during COVID-19: CDC's Considerations (CDC) Feb. 11, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html>
4. COVID-19 Cloth Face Covering (Mask) Requirement (APS) <https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/COVID19-Mask-Policy-MASTER-2.pdf>
5. Your Guide to Masks (CDC). Feb. 22, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/about-face-coverings.html>
6. Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Mitigation (CDC). Feb. 26, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/operation-strategy.html>
7. ED COVID-19 Handbook Volume 1: Strategies for Safely Reopening Elementary and Secondary Schools (US DOE). Feb. 2021. <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/reopening.pdf>