



# Diocese of New Ulm 2021-22 Return to Schools Guidance

August 4, 2021

In His Easter homily, Pope Francis offered a message of hope and new beginnings that speaks to us now as we prepare for a new academic year: “In these dark months of the pandemic, let us listen to the risen Lord as he invites us to begin anew and never lose hope. It is always possible to begin anew, because there is a new life that God can awaken in us in spite of all our failures.” The schools of the Diocese of New Ulm live in a world of hope every September as we joyfully anticipate the new academic year. This year is no different.

On July 28, 2021, the MN Department of Health provided recommendations for return to school protocols based on the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) latest guidance. We have designed a collaborative plan for the schools of the Diocese of New Ulm that has taken into account the needs of our schools and families, MN Department of Health/CDC recommendations and protocols, as well as the educational and personal experience we have gained in coping with this world-wide pandemic over the past 18 months.

As Catholic schools, we take seriously the responsibility to develop the whole child: physically, emotionally, spiritually, and academically. Last year forced us to make the physical needs of our children the highest priority. Maintaining a high level of physical safety continues to be a priority as students return to the classroom.

The plan that follows is based on current needs and data. Guidance may be modified as needed and communicated to school communities in the months ahead. At a minimum and barring any legal mandates from the State of MN for nonpublic schools, all Catholic schools in the Diocese of New Ulm will implement the following strategies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 during the 2021-2022 academic year.

## **Cleaning/Disinfecting**

Schools will establish a plan for cleaning and disinfecting and provide the needed supplies.

## **Contact Tracing**

It is still mandatory to report confirmed COVID cases per MN Rule 4605.7070, “any person in charge of any institution, school, child care facility, or camp to report cases of COVID-19 to the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH).” The responsibility for contact tracing lies with trained professionals at Minnesota Department of Health. Catholic schools should assist MDH by providing relevant information when requested.

### **Communication to Parents Regarding Exposure to Infectious Disease**

When students are potentially exposed to any infectious disease (including but not limited to COVID-19) at school, school leaders will notify parents following their infectious disease notification policy. For additional information go to MDH School Planning Guide.

### **Curriculum Planning**

The focus of our schools has always been, and continues to be, excellence in every area. We will therefore continue in-person instruction and return to practices that include classroom collaboration among students and teachers.

### **Drinking Fountains**

Students are always encouraged to bring a water bottle to use throughout the school day. Drinking fountains will be opened and available for student use.

### **Facility Ventilation**

In many schools, new ventilation systems were acquired during the pandemic. These are still beneficial and their use is encouraged.

### **Hand Sanitizing**

Hand sanitizer stations will be available in schools, while students will be further encouraged to wash their hands with soap and water. Students will be instructed in the practices of good hygiene.

### **Illness**

We are asking parents to be honest and vigilant about their children's health and are depending on them to help make common sense decisions regarding their children's health. Students and employees are expected to remain at home when they are sick. Schools will promptly send children and employees home when they display symptoms of COVID-19 illness. Parents are expected to monitor health concerns at home.

In determining when students may return to school after an illness, schools will follow their standard illness exclusion policy (e.g. fever-free for 24 hours without fever-reducing medication) unless a student has a lab-confirmed case of COVID-19.

Students with lab-confirmed cases of COVID-19 are allowed to return to school when all of the following are true (Minnesota Department of Health, 2021):

- They feel better. Their cough, shortness of breath, or other symptoms have substantially improved;
- It has been at least 10 days since they first felt sick or tested positive;
- They have had no fever for at least 24 hours, without using medicine that lowers fevers.

Employees will follow a similar policy.

For more details, you are strongly encouraged to reference the St. Mary's Return-To School Plan that can be found on our website.

### **Liturgical Celebrations**

It is of the utmost importance that our Catholic Identity remain alive and well in our various liturgical celebrations. Schools will follow the most current protocols outlined by the Diocese of New Ulm regarding liturgy. To date they include:

- Families and guests are encouraged to be a part of liturgical celebrations.
- There are no capacity limits in church buildings.
- Communion will be distributed under one form.
- Holy water may be used.
- The offertory procession is as usual.
- The Sign of Peace may be used at the pastor's discretion.
- Servers are allowed.
- Singing is encouraged.

### **Masks**

The State's legal mandate requiring face coverings in public and nonpublic schools expired at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. The Diocese of New Ulm does not require Catholic school students or employees to wear face coverings. Parents and guardians are well-positioned to determine if their child should wear a face covering while outside of the home and out in the community. No student will be prevented from wearing a face covering. Catholic schools will work to reduce any stigmatization associated with the decision to wear or not wear a face covering. We will continue to foster communities of respect and kindness, whether masked or unmasked.

Masking is still required on all school buses. This is a federal requirement as school buses (both public and private) are considered public transportation.

### **Pandemic Preparedness Plan**

Schools should minimize changes to the in-person learning model for individual students, classrooms, and schools. Schools should only utilize the distance learning model when they have been advised by a competent public health authority to temporarily close a school building or classroom due to concerns about the spread of an infectious disease.

Should the need arise to once again tighten structures to prevent the spread of illness, the school should have an established plan.

### **Physical Distancing**

Physical distancing of 3 feet is recommended by the CDC when and where possible. Small group interaction is an important part of the educational and social experience of our students. Schools should promote public health recommendations for physical distancing provided they do not: 1) disproportionately impact child development or the educational goals of the schools or 2) limit the school's ability to offer in-person learning to all of its students.

### **Quarantines**

Please reference to the St. Mary's Return-To-School Plan for the St. Mary's School protocol.

### **Screening for Symptoms**

We recognize the important role our parents play in all things, but especially in all things COVID-related. Parents will be expected to monitor their children for symptoms and keep them home if more than one of the following symptoms is evidenced. Symptoms include:

- Fever of 100.4 degrees F or higher
- New or worsening cough
- Difficulty breathing/hard time breathing
- Loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Chills
- Muscle pain
- Extreme fatigue
- Severe headache
- New nasal congestion or runny nose

### **Specialist Instruction**

Students may travel in and out of specialist classrooms for instruction.

### **Temperature Checks**

Schools will not need to administer temperature checks. Parents should monitor for fevers at home.

### **Visitors**

We recognize the important role families and volunteers play in our school communities. Please reference to the St. Mary's Return-To-School Plan for the St. Mary's School protocol.

---

This plan was created based on the current situation, and it is imperative that schools and families remain flexible in the months ahead. There may come a time when the need to pivot to a new set of guidelines will arise. At that time, we will re-evaluate and use the most current data to modify this plan. The 2020-2021 academic year was proof that our schools are capable of doing great things with flexibility and grace, and we hope the next year will be even smoother.

We move forward in joyful hope, trusting that brighter days lie ahead. Thanks to all who continue to go the extra mile to live out our mission to be the loving face of Christ to each and every person in our communities. Pray for each other.