

## PreK Staff Qualifications and Instructional Models impacted by COVID-19

### Purpose

[A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Reopening Schools, Fall 2020](#) and the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) [Hybrid Learning During the 2020-2021 School Year](#) established state-level guidance for reopening schools for the 2020-2021 school year, and described both the health requirements and instructional options necessary to ensure continuous operation of schools. This supplemental guidance addresses prequalified public and private prekindergarten education (PreK) program staff qualification requirements and PreK instructional models impacted by COVID-19.

### Background

[Act 166 of 2014, Vermont's Universal Prekindergarten Education law](#), ensures that each and every child who is 3, 4 or 5 years of age and not enrolled in kindergarten has the opportunity to access and participate in a prequalified prekindergarten education program at public expense. This means that each child is entitled to receive PreK education by a licensed early childhood educator (ECE) or early childhood special education (ECSE). [Act 166 February 2019 Memo](#) states that private PreK program's licensed ECE/ECSE must be "physically present on site" during PreK hours of instruction.

### Staff Qualification Requirements by PreK Program Type

#### Public PreK Program

As a requirement under Act 166, teachers in each PreK classroom in a school district operated PreK program shall hold a valid Vermont educator license with an endorsement in either early childhood education or early childhood special education.

#### Private PreK Program

As a requirement under Act 166, private PreK programs shall employ, or contract for the services of, at least one teacher who holds a valid Vermont educator license with an endorsement in either early childhood education or early childhood special education. Ten hours that the licensed teacher is present shall coincide with the hours of prekindergarten education paid for by tuition from districts. For licensed family childcare homes that are prequalified private PreK programs, a licensed ECE/ECSE may provide weekly training and supervision virtually or telephone.

### Contact Information:

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Therefore, if a public or private PreK program provides an option for families to offer remote/distance or hybrid learning model then PreK instruction must be delivered by the program's employed/contracted licensed ECE/ECSE. Private PreK programs who choose to implement a remote/distance and/or hybrid learning model of PreK instruction must notify partnering school districts of their intent, and both parties must agree to the terms of a plan and amend their contract as warranted.

### **Waivers from Holding an Online Teaching Specialist (OTS) Endorsement**

At their July 9, 2020, meeting, the Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators voted to extend a waiver from holding an Online Teaching Specialist (OTS) endorsement to licensed educators who remotely teach students PreK-12. This waiver holds educators harmless based on school district and/or private PreK programs' plans to implement remote/distance and/or hybrid learning models. This waiver now extends to December 31, 2020, and is anticipated to be revisited for possible extension by the Standards Board.

### **Use of a Substitute in the Event of Illness of a Licensed ECE/ECSE Teacher**

In the case of COVID-19-related illness of a licensed ECE/ECSE teacher for prequalified public or private prekindergarten education programs, a substitute may be used for on-site, remote/distance or hybrid learning for 30 school days. Private PreK programs must notify school district partners about the program's plan for continuing PreK education for students enrolled as well as complete the [AOE Change Form](#) as soon as possible. If a public or private PreK program requires an extension period beyond 30 days, the program may submit a written request to the AOE for a waiver for an additional 45 school days. As part of the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) Accountability and Continuous Improvement System, approval of 45 school day extension period will be tracked by the AOE.

### **Expectations for PreK Instructional Models by Step**

The Vermont Department of Health and AOE's [A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Reopening Schools, Fall 2020](#) and the AOE's [Hybrid Learning During the 2020-2021 School Year](#) established the basic state-level direction for reopening schools for the 2020-2021 school year, and described both the health requirements and instructional options necessary to ensure their continuous operation.

The three step levels align with different instructional models and are detailed below:

#### **Step I: Schools are closed for in-person instruction**

Remote learning opportunities should be provided for all students. Schools should support provision of student services such as school meal programs, as feasible.

- **Remote Learning:** Students receive instruction online or through distributed materials. Students and staff would be utilizing remote learning and would not be gathering in groups on school grounds.
- **Remote/Distance Learning:** "Hours" to implement weekly PreK education may include a combination of developmentally appropriate remote instruction, educational materials

and resources, as well as accompanying family-led activities and resources that are aligned with the Vermont Early Learning Standards.

## **Step II: Schools are open for in-person instruction with enhanced physical distancing measures and for children who live in the local geographic area only**

- **In-Person Learning:** Students receive instruction at school. In this disposition, schools should create as much space between students and teachers as is feasible during the day, but will not be held strictly to enforcing, at a minimum 3-6 feet of physical distancing during primary instructional time in the classroom for PreK-Grade 5. Activities and extracurricular programming should continue to follow the [A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Reopening Schools, Fall 2020](#).
- **Hybrid Learning:** Some combination of in-person learning and remote learning. A hybrid schedule can take many forms. In the growing array of educational options available to students and their parents, a hybrid model gives students both the experience of learning in a classroom and the personalization provided by online learning that is teacher-facilitated.
  - **Remote/Distance Learning:** “Hours” to implement weekly PreK education may include a combination of developmentally appropriate remote instruction, educational materials and resources, as well as accompanying family led activities and resources that are aligned with the Vermont Early Learning Standards.

## **Step III: Schools are open for in-person instruction with distancing measures**

Restrict attendance to those from limited transmission areas (other Step III areas) only.

### **Group Size for In-Person Instruction by PreK Program Type**

#### **Public PreK Programs**

The [A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Reopening Schools, Fall 2020](#) states that children must be kept in groups, not to exceed the maximum number allowed by state guidance, including teachers and staff.

#### **Private PreK Programs**

The Vermont Department of Health’s [Guidance for Child Care and School Age Camps/Care](#) states:

- Children must be kept in groups, not to exceed the maximum number allowed by state Executive Order, including teachers and staff, although keeping children in pods of 25 is considered best practice.
- Staff and family childcare providers are responsible to set-up the environment and to adjust practices based upon Vermont Department of Health COVID-19 health guidance.

Children should be encouraged and supported by adhering to health and safety procedures as is developmentally appropriate.

### **For Both Public and Private PreK Programs**

Please note that when childcare licensing regulations for classroom capacity require a smaller group size than the state Executive Order, both public and private PreK programs are required to continue to follow the smaller group size.

### **Physical Distancing by PreK Program Type**

#### **Public PreK Programs**

[A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Reopening Schools, Fall 2020](#)

recommends:

- Physical distancing between 3-6 feet is acceptable in younger children (PreK to Grade 5) and when possible students should be spaced at least 3 feet apart.
- When physical distancing is not possible, it is even more important for students and staff to adhere to the facial covering requirement.
- Adults and adult staff within schools should maintain a distance of 6 feet from other adults as much as possible.
- Teachers and staff should maintain a distance of 6 feet from students as much as possible. However, brief periods of closer contact, such as when a student may need one-on-one guidance, clarification or assistance are expected and permitted. In these cases, staff should stand/kneel/sit side-by-side students (rather than face-to-face) for brief amounts of time (less than 15 minutes).

#### **Private PreK Programs**

- Follow [Guidance for Childcare and School Age Camps/Care](#) on physical distancing practices.
- For private PreK programs located in school buildings, please follow the public PreK programs physical distancing practices as stated above.

#### **Additional Practices to Consider**

- Rearrange furniture and play spaces to meet social distancing recommendations.
- Use carpet squares, yarn, masking tape, mats, trays or other items to ensure children identify their learning spaces and appropriate boundaries.
- Model social distancing when interacting with students, parents and colleagues.
- Create and develop a scripted social story or role play activity to help children with disabilities who have trouble understanding what social distancing is.
- Have fun with hula-hoops to emphasize personal 'bubble space' for each child. Place hula-hoops on floor for children to sit in during circle time; stand in when painting at the easel, or use during transition in hallway etc.

- Provide positive verbal reminders coupled with visual prompts/photographs to support children's understanding of expectations.
- Rotate small groups of children through center time play (centers).
- Provide individual sensory bins to support sensory exploration for each and every child's needs.
- Pretend to be a butterfly, octopus, long snake or alligator as a tangible way to emphasize appropriate space and distance between children.
- Offer students more opportunities for individual play and solo activities. For example, a teacher may ask students to draw, color, cut shapes or do puzzles to improve and practice their fine motor skills.
- Plan activities that do not require close physical contact between multiple children.
- Stagger indoor and outdoor play and adjust schedules to reduce the number of children in the same play area.
- Send home a tip sheet for parents and caregivers so they learn about social distancing and the strategies that may help their children practice social distancing outside of the school environment.

## Resources

[AOE Act 166 Guidance: February 2019 Memo](#)

[Vermont State Board of Education Manual of Rules Series 2600 Prekindergarten Education.](#)

[Connecting with Families.](#) National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI).

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Prevention: General Requirements and Prevention Ideas for Workplaces.](#) CDC

[CDC Readiness and Planning Tool to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 in K-12 Schools.](#) CDC