



Shared Decision-Making on Return-to-Work Decisions for School-Based Personnel

Back-to-school decisions have never been more challenging than in the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents, teachers and others are likely to ask primary care clinicians for advice regarding the safety of returning to school this fall. Primary care clinicians are not expected to provide medical releases for such decisions but nonetheless can hold strong shared decision-making conversations.

The good news is that, in Vermont, there are few cases of COVID-19 at the present time. That means the risk of COVID-19 transmission at school and elsewhere is very low. Nonetheless, schools are putting measures in place to slow transmission, and everyone is alert to the possibility that the local epidemiology could change.

Given the complexity of decisions to return to school and uncertainty about the future, there is no one-size-fits-all answer to individual questions about whether a teacher or staff member should return to school this year.

Here are key concepts that help explain why reopening schools is important to consider during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. **School is vital** to child intellectual and emotional development;
2. Most **students have very low risk of serious COVID-19 disease**;
3. Despite clear evidence that children can be infected by and transmit SARS-CoV-2, and occasional school-based outbreaks of COVID-19 occur, **children and schools have not been leading drivers of the pandemic**; and,
4. **Science shows how we can lower transmission risk** in school, from masks to physical distancing to innovations in hybrid/online education.

Beyond that general context for making individualized decisions, physicians and patients should weigh:

1. **Local epidemiology.** If COVID-19 rates in Vermont remain extremely low, the risk of infection in any situation is extremely low.
2. **Personal medical risk.** Does your patient have low, average or high medical risk of developing severe COVID-19? Everyone has some level of risk, and you can help patients identify where they sit on the risk continuum.
3. **Personal safety measures.** Does your patient have occupational or other reasons they cannot benefit from physical distancing or mask wearing, such as an occupation that makes it impossible to wear a mask around others?

4. **Family medical risk.** Does your patient live with a loved one with high risk of severe COVID-19 that might make it riskier for your patient to return to school?
5. **School risk mitigation measures.** Schools can lower transmission risk through measures like limiting class size, encouraging physical distancing, use of hybrid/online education, and encouragement to wear masks. What will the patient experience at their workplace?
6. **Personal/household capacity to engage alternate plans.** Some patients/families have access to alternate plans that might help them lower their own personal risk. Some do not. What options are available to your patient?

To support shared decision-making conversations that help patients think through personal decisions about going back to school, we want to make sure you have the helpful resources below at your fingertips.

Thank you for your outstanding work to support parents, children, educators and others through the uncertainty and worry of the COVID-19 pandemic! We are proud of the many ways Vermonters have risen to the challenge of keeping each other safe from COVID-19.

Special appreciation for this document goes to Tim Lahey, MD, MMSc, infectious diseases physician at University of Vermont Medical Center and professor of medicine at UVM's Larner College of Medicine.

Helpful resources

- [COVID-19 Guidance for Vermont Schools](#) from the Vermont Department of Health
- [School Decision-Making Tool for Parents, Caregivers, and Guardians](#) from the Centers for Disease Control
- [Back to School Planning: Checklists to Guide Parents, Guardians, and Caregivers](#) from the Centers for Disease Control
- [Considerations for Schools during COVID-19](#) from the Centers for Disease Control
- [COVID-19 Transmission and Children: The Child Is Not to Blame](#) article in *Pediatrics* from UVM pediatric infectious diseases physicians Benjamin Lee and William Raszka
- [Back to school in a pandemic: A guide to all the factors keeping parents and educators up at night](#) article in *The Washington Post* by Vermont parenting author Jessica Lahey and infectious diseases physician Tim Lahey
- [Return to School Guidance](#) from the American Academy of Pediatrics
- To report a suspected COVID-19 case, please contact the Health Department at 802-863-7240.