



LEA Plan for Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Service Pursuant to the Federal American Rescue Plan Act, Section 2001(i)

Introduction and Background

As announced in the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE)'s [April 28, 2021 broadcast](#), in March 2021 President Biden signed the Federal [American Rescue Plan \(ARP\) Act](#), Public Law 117-2, into law. The ARP Act provides an additional \$122 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) to States and school districts to help safely reopen, sustain the safe operation of schools, and address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the nation's students. As with the previous ESSER funds available under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), the purpose of the additional funding is to support local educational agencies (LEAs) in preparing for and responding to the impacts of COVID-19 on educators, students, and families. Additional information on ARP ESSER may be found in the NJDOE's [funding comparison fact sheet](#).

Section 2001(i)(1) of the ARP Act requires each LEA that receives ARP ESSER funds to develop and make publicly available on the LEA's website, no later than 30 days after receiving ARP ESSER funds, a plan for the safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services for all schools (Safe Return Plan). A Safe Return Plan is required of all fund recipients, including those that have already returned to in-person instruction. Section 2001(i)(2) of the ARP Act further requires that the LEA seek public comment on the Safe Return Plan and take those comments into account in finalization of the Safe Return Plan. Under the interim final requirements published in [Volume 86, No. 76 of the Federal Register](#) by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE), an LEA must periodically, but no less frequently than every six months through September 30, 2023, review and, as appropriate, revise its Safe Return Plan.

Pursuant to those requirements, **LEAs must submit to the NJDOE and post on their website their Safe Return Plans by June 24, 2021.** The NJDOE intends to make LEA ARP ESSER Fund applications available in EWEG on May 24, 2021 and LEAs will submit their Safe Return Plans to the NJDOE via EWEG. To assist LEAs with the development of their Safe Return Plans, the NJDOE is providing the following template.

This template incorporates the federally-required components of the Safe Return Plan. The questions in the template below will be included in the LEA ARP ESSER Fund application in EWEG. LEAs will submit responses to the questions within the LEA ARP ESSER Fund application in EWEG by June 24, 2021. The NJDOE hopes that this template will allow LEAs to effectively plan for that submission and to easily post the information to their websites as required by the ARP Act.

Note that on May 17, 2021, Governor Murphy [announced](#) that upon the conclusion of the 2020-2021 school year, portions of Executive Order 175 allowing remote learning will be rescinded, meaning that schools will be required to provide full-day, in-person instruction, as they were prior to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency. The NJDOE and New Jersey Department of Health will share additional information regarding State requirements or guidance for health and safety protocols for the 2021-2022 school year as it becomes available.

Template: LEA Plan for Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services

LEA Name: Mercer County Special Services School District

Date (06/07/2021):

Date Revised (1/14/2025):

1. Maintaining Health and Safety

For each mitigation strategy listed below (A–H), please describe how the LEA will maintain the health and safety of students, educators, and other staff and the extent to which it has adopted policies, and a description of any such policies, on each of the following safety recommendations established by the CDC.

A. Universal and correct wearing of masks

The wearing of masks is optional for staff, students, and visitors. The district will look to ongoing updates by the CDC, NJDOH and Executive Orders (EOs) regarding the wearing of face coverings in NJ schools and adjust as deemed necessary. As of October of 2024 the NJDOH recommends the following.

If you test positive or develop symptoms, follow these steps to prevent spreading the virus:

Stay home and avoid contact with others, including household members.

Resume normal activities when, for at least 24 hours, symptoms are improved, and you are fever free without the use of fever-reducing medication.

Wear a mask and take extra precautions for 5 days after returning to normal activities.

If you have been exposed to COVID-19 or another respiratory virus:

Implement prevention strategies like masking, improving air flow, practicing good hygiene, and physical distancing.

If symptoms develop, get tested, and seek treatment if you qualify.

Avoid contact with high-risk individuals for 5 days and take precautions if contact is unavoidable.

B. Physical distancing (e.g., including use of cohorts/podding)

The school administration will work with the school staff to reorganize and rearrange teaching and workspaces throughout the building in order to accommodate social distancing guidelines. Each space will be reviewed by a member of the school administration team to assure that all components of the workspaces are in compliance with approved guidelines. School administration will work with the Manager of Buildings and Grounds to procure any additional materials that are needed to assure compliance with necessary mandates.

The school schedule will be designed to limit the amount of student movement throughout the school building and to utilize learning and work spaces to ensure the highest level of student/staff safety and social distancing guidelines. Instructional staff were informed regarding safe practices within classrooms, use of hallways, and restricting sending students to offices to maintain social distancing guidelines. Buildings & Grounds Office has posted and will maintain posting of signage promoting behaviors to reduce the spread. Buildings & Grounds has also posted signage encouraging use of face coverings and social distancing.

Classroom and staff areas have been measured to calculate new occupancy using social distancing (3ft.). Maximum Occupancy has been posted on each space. Instructional staff have been notified regarding procedures on social distancing and limiting any shared use of furniture as much as possible, i.e., one student per table or use tables as individual desks.

Currently, barriers are placed in all spaces where Principals have requested them. Student foldable barriers have also been placed in instructional areas where requested.

Instructional staff are notified of safe practices on limiting shared use of any classroom items as much as possible.

If instructors are in need of additional items to ensure safe practices, i.e. additional books, they should inform their building Principal. Shared objects are disinfected between uses. Instructional staff are notified regarding procedures on students storing their belongings, times of locker use, and spacing of locker room use. Where lockers are not in use, students' personal belongings will be separated from others' and in individually labeled containers, cubbies, or areas.

Instructors will be encouraged to use outdoor space as much as safely possible, especially for Physical Education classes.

The district will follow CDC/DOH/EOs.

C. Handwashing and respiratory etiquette

Mercer County Special Services School District will:

- Teach and reinforce handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and increase monitoring of students and staff.
 - If soap and water are not readily available, hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol will be used (for staff and older children who can safely use hand sanitizer).
 - Signs with proper handwashing techniques are displayed near sinks.
- Encourage students and staff to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue if not wearing a mask.
 - Used tissues should be thrown in the trash and hand hygiene as outlined above should be performed immediately.
 - Signs reminding students and staff to cover coughs and sneezes are also displayed throughout the campus.
- Have adequate supplies including soap, hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol (for staff and older children who can safely use hand sanitizer), paper towels, tissues, and no-touch trash cans.
 - Buildings & Grounds has placed Hand Sanitizing Stations at all exits and entrances in use daily. Each classroom has a bathroom sink and kitchen sink, both are equipped with soap and towels for handwashing. Additionally, hand sanitizer has been placed in offices, classrooms and therapy rooms as needed to ensure students and staff have access to handwashing easily.
- Assist/observe young children to ensure proper handwashing.
 - Hand washing will occur at the beginning of each class, upon returning to the classroom, after using the bathroom, before eating, after sneezing/coughing or if students' hands become soiled.

School nursing staff will be asked for assistance in informing/reminding staff and students about frequent handwashing and sanitizer use. Teachers will allow for extra time for hand washing for students.

Classroom one-to-one assistants and nurses are provided with protective gear (i.e, gloves, gowns, or face shield) when working with or toileting or ill students.

D. Cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities, including improving ventilation

The Office of Buildings & Grounds will continue to monitor the functionality of all existing HVAC equipment. Temporary equipment has been placed in areas with non-functional or limited functioning equipment.

B&G has verified window functionality. Instructional staff will be notified about safely opening windows to increase ventilation. Staff encouraged to consult with school nursing staff about any student health concerns pertaining to increased ventilation.

Filters are changed quarterly. Filters will be monitored and in the event of a presumptive positive case all filters serving the area will be changed out.

Custodians are scheduled to provide ongoing cleaning and service to instructional and administrative spaces.

Cleaning of key touch points and bathrooms will be done periodically during the day. Normal cleaning and disinfection cleaning will occur each evening. After surfaces and objects are cleaned and sanitized with an EPA Approved H2O2 solution, all surfaces and objects are sprayed using an EPA registered disinfectant Brutabs using a victory sprayer or using a bucket or spray bottle.

Bathrooms are cleaned and sanitized and disinfected daily. Custodial staff will spot check bathrooms up to twice a day and will respond and provide on demand cleaning as needed. Bathrooms are deep cleaned at least once per week.

Shared telephones and desktop computers are wiped with a Hospital Grade EPA registered disinfectant each day, this product is also provided to teachers for use during the school day for as needed use.

The SOP identifies the appropriate EPA registered chemical for both cleaning and disinfection.

MCSSSD generally cleans surfaces with an H2O2 solution, floors with a neutral cleaning solution, and after cleaning is complete, using a victory sprayer, bucket, or spray bottle with disinfects with a chlorine-based product.

Our existing procedures account for cleaning various and non- homogenous surfaces.

All the noted minimum standard areas are addressed in daily cleaning. MCSSSD has a checklist and cleaning routine standard operating procedures developed those details the level of cleaning for all areas.

MCSSSD has procedures and equipment in place to respond to cleaning and disinfecting spaces occupied by a person deemed to presumptive positive for COVID-19. Spaces will be cleaned and sanitized B&G Staff wearing appropriate PPE. B&G staff will then disinfect touch points and horizontal surfaces with disinfection using BruTabs solution either via spray bottle, bucket and microfiber cloth or victory sprayer.

In the event of a significant number of students or staff getting sick, rooms can be closed as needed and air scrubbers can be placed in the spaces.

E. Contact tracing. Contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine, in collaboration with the State, local, territorial, or Tribal health departments

Individual contact tracing in schools is no longer recommended by the CDC or the NJ Dept. of Health.

COVID-19 exclusion (isolation) criteria for persons who have COVID-19 compatible symptoms or who test positive for COVID-19: Individuals regardless of vaccination status who test positive, and individuals with COVID-19 symptoms who have not been tested and do not have an alternative diagnosis from their healthcare provider should:

- Stay home for at least 5 full days after the onset of symptoms or if asymptomatic after the positive test (day of symptoms is day 0; if asymptomatic, day the test was performed is day 0)
AND
- If they have no symptoms or symptoms are resolving after 5 days and are fever-free (without the use of fever-reducing medication) for 24 hours, they can return to school AND:
 - Wear a mask when around others at home and in public for an additional 5 days (including participation in any extracurricular activities).
Time without mask being worn should be kept to a minimum.

Direct Contact: Close contact is defined as being within 6 feet of someone with suspected or known COVID-19 for 15 or more minutes during a 24-hour period. In certain situations, it may be difficult to determine whether individuals have met this criterion and an entire cohort, classroom, or other group may need to be considered exposed.

Individuals would be considered exposed to someone with COVID-19 from 2 days prior to symptom onset (or positive test date if asymptomatic) to 5 days after onset (not during the case's additional precaution period at day 6-10).

Quarantine is no longer recommended for people who are exposed to COVID-19 except in certain high risk congregate settings. In schools and ECE settings, which are generally not considered high-risk congregate settings, people who were exposed to COVID-19 can continue to attend school as long as they remain asymptomatic.

Note: The inability to consistently and correctly wear a mask due to intellectual, developmental, or physical disability or medical contraindications alone should not be a basis for disallowing a return to school activities. Schools should assess, on an individualized basis, the appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities who are unable to wear a mask, taking into consideration the following:

- The level of risk of the exposure (e.g., ongoing household exposure imposes a higher risk than exposure within six feet of distance or classroom exposure).
- The feasibility of conducting testing during the 5 days after exposure (at least immediately and on day 6).
- Whether there are individuals in the classroom who are known to be at high risk for severe disease.
- The individual's vaccination status.
- Other mitigation measures in place (e.g., ventilation, distancing) and whether they can be strengthened or are already optimized.

- Circumstances of the child’s learning and school attendance needs (e.g., cannot participate in remote instruction).

The school nurse will inform the local DOH of any cases considered to be an “outbreak”.

TRAVEL: If you have traveled internationally and are not up to date with COVID-19 vaccination, it is recommended you quarantine for 5 days and test.

MCSSSD has designated the following locations as holding areas for students/staff presenting with symptoms, prior to being sent home, all students or staff will be evaluated by a school nurse.

MHS – Student Holding – Room 210

MES– Student Holding – Room 330

JFC – Student Holding - Room 402

Staff who are identified with symptoms related to COVID-19 will immediately be asked to go home and must wear a mask while indoors.

F. Diagnostic and screening testing

CDC no longer recommends routine screening testing in schools. If at a high Covid-19 community level MCSSSD will consider implementing screening testing.

Some home-based tests have been authorized by FDA for screening purposes, others for diagnostic testing. Testing for COVID-19 with a self-test when symptomatic can provide quick results that allow for timely isolation and contact notification. Self-tests, like all antigen tests, are less sensitive than PCR tests and self-tests are additionally subject to potential sample collection and testing errors. If persons are symptomatic (and particularly if they also have been in close contact with someone who has COVID19), a single negative self-test result should not be considered sufficient to rule-out infection and return to normal activities. After a negative self-test result, the symptomatic individual should either take a second self-test at least 48 hours after the first one (per manufacturer’s instructions) or seek a test administered by a healthcare provider, either an antigen or a PCR test.

G. Efforts to provide vaccinations to educators, other staff, and students, if eligible

Mercer County Special Services School District held a vaccination clinic for students and staff and their families in the Mercer Elementary School gymnasium, January 10, 2022. This clinic offered the first, second, and booster vaccinations. During the school year literature is given to families with updates on where vaccinations are available.

H. Appropriate accommodations for children with disabilities with respect to the health and safety policies

The MCSSSD will follow CDC, State, and local guidelines in providing reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities or underlying medical conditions. The unique needs of each individual will be considered. Instructors are expected to consult with school nursing staff to monitor any students who may have special medical needs. Once identified, follow up with Buildings and Grounds and Custodial staff if additional sanitizing or other modifications need to be put in place for those students.

2. Ensuring Continuity of Services

A. Describe how the LEA will ensure continuity of services, including but not limited to services to address students' academic needs and students' and staff's social, emotional, mental health, and other needs, which may include student health and food services. (1000-character limit)

School personnel will contact local internet service providers to help determine what solution(s) would work best for students in need and secure such services. School leaders and instructional staff will provide guidelines for parents and guardians that will help them create and maintain a distraction-free home learning environment and regular routines that nurture student success. School leaders will continue to aid families in need of food and health-related services. A plan is in place to continue to provide such services. School leaders will work with staff and students to develop fundamental skills for life's effectiveness. These skills include recognizing and managing emotions, developing care and concern for others, making responsible decisions, establishing positive relationships, and handling challenging situations effectively. For those students who need additional support, the skills being taught in the classroom can be incorporated and reinforced within mental health interventions provided by school mental health professionals.

3. Public Comment

A. Describe how the LEA sought public comment on its plan, and how it took those public comment into account in the development of its plan.

Note, the ARP requires that LEAs seek public comment for each 60-day revision to the plan. (1000-character limit)

Notice of update will be provided at the January 2025 board meeting with a reminder that comments can be made to the noted email address (publiccomments@mcsssd.us)

B. Describe how the LEA ensured that the plan is in an understandable and uniform format; is to the extent practicable written in a language that parents can understand or, if not practicable to provide written translations to a parent with limited English proficiency, will be orally translated for such a parent; and upon request by a parent who is an individual with a disability as defined by the ADA, will be provided in an alternative format accessible to that parent. (1000-character limit)

The plan was presented in plain language. The document is also available in Spanish on our website. If a parent requires an alternate written or other translation, one will be provided to the greatest extent practicable.