

# How K-12 schools can protect against the next pandemic

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By Marshal Sterio

Lingering questions about COVID-19 and the rapid rise of the Delta variant have hung an ominous cloud over the start of the 2021-22 school year. Schools are debating mask policies, whether or not to require faculty to show proof of vaccination against COVID-19, and some are even considering a continuation of remote learning practices developed over the first 18 months of the pandemic. So just how can schools keep their students and faculty safe this year and beyond?

**According to the CDC**, it all starts with encouraging vaccination. **Children as young as 12 can now receive the Pfizer vaccine**, so a large portion of the K-12 population is eligible for vaccination. Many colleges and universities are requiring students to have proof of COVID-19 vaccinations in order to return to campus, and the **Los Angeles Unified School District is one of the first K-12 school districts to do the same**. How many other districts follow suit remains to be seen; but regardless of whether or not your school requires the shot, there are other strategies to employ that will make your campus a safer place to be.

Masks, social distancing, plexiglass dividers, and other familiar sights from the past 18 months will continue to play an important role in the future. So will precautions like touchless bathroom facilities and supplemental filtration for your HVAC system. Each of these adaptations adds an additional layer of safety to your school campus, making it harder for germs to spread from person to person.

You can think of this layered approach as similar to the safety features in an automobile. Good tires and brakes make it easy to stop the car or avoid hazards. Seatbelts, airbags, and all the rest help protect you when all else fails. Once you get past the steering and braking, these safety features are predominantly passive protections. They don't require anyone to take action to be effective. Many of the COVID precautions you can employ at your school will work the same way, improving overall safety without relying on individuals to get a shot or put on PPE.

Take supplemental HVAC filtration, for example. Using a combination of high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters and ultraviolet germicidal irradiation (UVGI), these supplemental systems are capable of **neutralizing viruses** and removing mold, allergens, microorganisms, odors, smoke, bio-aerosols, nitrous oxide, and many other pollutants from the air. This adds an important level of protection to any building, mitigating the risk of airborne illnesses without relying on individuals to don PPE or take other active measures.

Touchless appliances like sinks, towel dispensers, and automatically opening doors provide similar mitigation for the danger of surface-spread germs. While the science shows that surface contact does little to spread COVID-19, the reality is that there are plenty of other illnesses that should be kept in mind when it comes to schools. Precautions against COVID-19 transmission are generally precautions against the flu and other diseases, as proven by **the 2020/2021 flu season being a mild one so far**. And with new COVID variants on the rise, taking precautions against aerosol spread germs now could help protect your school in the future should a new coronavirus show a proclivity for lingering on surfaces. The pandemic, for all the ways it shook our society, should also serve as a pivotal moment in the way we can slow down the spread of communicable diseases or prevent them altogether. All the early pandemic PSAs about washing your hands, coughing into your elbow, and maintaining social distancing will be just as well used against the flu as they were against COVID-19.

Precautions like supplemental air filtration and touchless solutions really increase your school's defenses against not just this virus, but whatever comes next. They also give your school district something substantial it can point to when asked what you're doing to **protect students, faculty, and everyone else** on your campus.

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