How Maine Determines County Risk Levels for School Reopening

Whether and how to return to in-person classroom education are questions on many Mainers’ minds. Slowing the spread of the highly contagious and sometimes deadly coronavirus has meant changes to how we work, shop, and engage with each other. It will also change how we teach and learn in schools.

The Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC) fully and thoroughly consider the safety of students, teachers, and staff in schools. Having previously recommended “stay at home” orders to protect Maine people, they will neither be slow nor shy about raising concerns about risk of transmission of COVID-19 in schools. Working with the Department of Education, they plan to post updated health information every two weeks but will raise a red flag for a county at any time when warranted.

The State announced in July a [framework](https://www.maine.gov/governor/mills/sites/maine.gov.governor.mills/files/inline-files/Framework%20for%20Returning%20to%20Classroom%20Instruction%20UPDATE%207-17.pdf) for returning to classroom instruction. In addition to requirements and recommendations for instruction, the framework also includes two types of health and safety guideposts for school administrators making decisions about whether and how to return to in-classroom education in the fall.

The first is about readiness. This involves health and safety precautions that schools must follow if some or all children will be back in the classroom. These requirements are common sense measures that many of us in Maine are already following: screening children for symptoms before coming to school, ensuring physical distancing, using face masks, keeping hands clean, wearing personal protective equipment for those who must have close contact in order to provide necessary services, and staying home during any recommended COVID-19 quarantine or isolation periods. These requirements are rooted in science, experience, and real-world practicality.

The second guidepost is an assessment of the prevalence of COVID-19 in each county. DHHS and Maine CDC have developed a [Health Advisory System](https://www.maine.gov/doe/framework/part-I) to categorize counties. “Green” suggests that the county has a relatively low risk of COVID-19 spread and that schools may consider in-person instruction, if they can meet each of the minimum health and safety requirements. “Yellow” suggests that a county has an elevated risk of COVID-19 spread, so schools may consider additional precautions to reduce the number of people in classrooms at any one time and decrease interactions and risk. “Red” suggests a county has a high risk of COVID-19 spread and that in-person instruction is inadvisable.

It is important to emphasize that a “green” designation does not mean that there is “no risk” of COVID-19 transmission. These designations should be viewed as “dials” for how many people can safely be in schools that are ready. In addition, these designations presume that the health and safety precautions noted above are followed by all students, teachers, and staff. They are also specific to the unique circumstances of schools, and are not intended to guide decision-making for other settings, such as businesses.

Maine DHHS and CDC make these county-level assessments based on an assessment of several pieces of epidemiological data, both quantitative and qualitative. These data include, but are not limited to, recent case rates, positivity rates, and syndromic data (*e.g.*, symptoms of influenza or COVID-19). That information and much more is publicly posted every week on the Maine CDC [website](https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/infectious-disease/epi/airborne/coronavirus/data.shtml).

There is not a specific formula or strict cutoff point, such as a positivity rate above a particular threshold, or a specific number of new cases per capita. That is because no single metric fully captures the risk of COVID-19 in a county or within a school. For example, as of July 30, Sagadahoc County had the highest positivity rate of any county – but had 11 cases, no outbreaks, and no more than 3 positive cases in a given day. As such, it was categorized as green on July 31. Similarly, the cases per capita in Washington County “tripled” between July 30 and August 6 – but that meant going from 2 to 7 cases detected over the course of two weeks. That county’s positivity rate for that two-week period was 0.5 percent, which is low. That said, small but worsening trends in a county may justify moving a county from green to yellow in the future.

DHHS and Maine CDC also consider qualitative factors, such as the presence of outbreaks that may potentially affect school-age children. For example, an outbreak at an after-school program may lead a county otherwise designated as “green” to be classified as “yellow.” Also considered are the nature of outbreaks throughout the state. For example, recently some farmworkers in Hancock County tested positive upon arrival to Maine. But they were isolated at a hotel in a different county. While cases per capita increased in Hancock County, this increase by itself did not pose a risk of COVID-19 spread in Hancock County schools.

The county-level color designations are advisory for school administrators. Those administrators may consider local conditions and make their own decisions. For example, a school administrator in one corner of a large “red” county may decide it is safe to conduct some hybrid learning if a COVID-19 surge is concentrated in a distant part of the same county from which it is unlikely that staff or students will be regularly travelling. And, “green” does not mean “go”: until there is a vaccine or highly effective treatment for COVID-19, health and safety measures for students, teachers, and staff are required. Even in counties designated as “green,” in-classroom education will be different from before COVID-19. Moreover, irrespective of a county’s color, a school’s ability to meet the requirements may limit the number of students in the school: some school buildings are simply not big enough, for example, to bring all kids back at the same time safely.

Maine DHHS and CDC expect to learn from this process of categorizing counties by risk for schools and will improve it as needed – as they have every step of the way during this pandemic. Maine has proven it can balance safety with reopened parts of our economy. Together, we can do the same with schools.