



A Union of Professionals

K-12 and Higher Education Leader Bulletin

COVID-19: The Delta and Omicron Variants—Don't Let Your Guard Down

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As situations change and COVID-19 variants develop, it is critical that the union exercises and maintains our voice in how school districts will respond to new developments. Having a seat at the table remains an essential component in responding to the coronavirus.

New Actions to Protect Against COVID-19 and the Variants

Our No. 1 priority remains keeping school buildings open for safe and welcoming in-person learning. In the wake of multiple COVID-19 variants, we have learned a great deal about the strategies that help keep our schools open, and the White House has put those lessons into practice: making testing affordable and accessible and using it more aggressively, ensuring vaccines and boosters are widely available, and bringing the entire education community—and the country—together in this effort.

Continue to Practice the 'Tried and True'

We cannot let our guard down and lapse on the known safety and health measures that help reduce the spread of the virus. These basic health and safety considerations must be seen as paramount for maintaining layers of protection in the workplace.

Five key mitigation strategies that address health and safety concerns must stay in place for the foreseeable future. Each is important but represents only one piece of a very complicated puzzle, and each piece needs to work in tandem with the others for optimum effectiveness.

Vaccination and Testing

The AFT believes that vaccination against COVID-19 is an integral part in ending the pandemic and remains highly effective against the virus. Vaccination is the most important opportunity to protect yourself; the rest of the strategies rely on others and come with uncertainty.

Primary COVID-19 vaccines are widely available to children ages 5-18 and all adults. Additionally, adults who completed a primary vaccination series at least six months ago and those who received a Johnson & Johnson shot at least two months ago are eligible for a booster.

Find these resources and more at www.aft.org/coronavirus

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of 1.7 million professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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The AFT urges all—vaccinated and unvaccinated—to continue to get tested for COVID-19 every week. Consistently testing and monitoring for COVID-19 symptoms is an important step in ending the pandemic. If you have private insurance, you are now able to get an in-person test covered in physicians' offices, pharmacies and clinics with no cost sharing, and at-home tests will be reimbursed by your insurance. Additionally, federal, state and local governments are rolling out locations nationwide where you will be able to pick up free at-home testing kits.

Face Coverings

The AFT recommends the use of face coverings to prevent transmission of the virus. Several studies point to the effectiveness of universal masking and the reduction of in-school transmission of COVID-19. This is especially important when working indoors, during outdoor events when physical distancing cannot be achieved, and during other activities like transportation to and from school.

Physical Distancing

We know that physical distancing can be an effective method to minimize exposure to COVID-19 and that extended contact (15 minutes or greater) with potentially infectious individuals increases the risk of COVID-19 spread. Physical distancing is especially important for people who are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

The AFT believes that instead of focusing on semantics, the approach to physical distancing should focus on looking at the overall capacity of both the building and all other spaces, and then figuring out how many people can be accommodated in a given space. For example, just like there are signs in all rooms for maximum occupancy to meet the fire code, we need to reconsider spaces for maximum occupancy for COVID-19 considerations.

Enhanced Ventilation and Filtration

School buildings vary in age and construction, including the design and operation of ventilation and filtration systems. Therefore, there is no "one size fits all" approach to developing an enhanced ventilation strategy.

What we do know is that the vast majority of coronavirus transmission occurs indoors during the winter months when people spend more time inside. Ventilation plays a critical role in removing and diluting exhaled virus-laden air, thus lowering the overall concentration and therefore any subsequent dose inhaled by the occupants.

The AFT believes that enhanced ventilation and filtration is a crucial piece in protecting yourself this winter; enhanced ventilation can help:

- Remove both large and small particles by bringing in the maximum amount of outside air to dilute any virus particles in the space;
- Eliminate or minimize recirculation of indoor air;
- Maximize filtration of recirculated or potentially contaminated air; and
- Provide proper directional airflow to ensure that contaminated air does not blow from one person to another.

Hand Hygiene, Cleaning and Disinfection

Normal routine cleaning with soap and water removes germs and dirt from surfaces and lowers the risk of spreading COVID-19 infection. Disinfectants kill germs on surfaces; by killing germs through this type of cleaning, you can further lower the risk of spreading infection.

For a cleaning and disinfecting program to work, it is necessary to have a comprehensive written protocol in the workplace. The AFT believes the protocol should include things such as:

- Protocols for using the least toxic Environmental Protection Agency-approved cleaning and disinfecting agents;
- Training on the chemicals that will be used, including access to safety data sheets and the proper personal protective equipment required;
- Clear guidance for who's responsible for this work; and
- A schedule of how and when cleaning and disinfecting should take place, including protocols for when and if a member of the workplace community tests positive.

A Note on Self-Care

Daily encounters with pandemic-driven anxiety among students, new awareness of the inequities children face, and increasingly burdensome work-life demands are threatening teachers' well-being and exposing them to "secondary trauma," a University of California, San Diego professor's research team found after surveying dozens of Southern California teachers.

Mental health is an important part of overall health and well-being. It affects how we think, feel and act. It may also affect how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices during an emergency.

Comprehensive employer COVID-19 plans should include information and resources on mental health for members:

- It's important that your members are aware of what is currently available to them under the district's employee advisory program if there is one.
- If there is not a program in place, this would be the time to begin discussions with management about opportunities such as counseling, virtual sessions for members to attend on topics like meditation and other stress-reducing practices.
- These should be offered to employees at no cost.

We all want this pandemic to be over, but we cannot let our guard down in keeping ourselves, our families, and the communities we serve as safe as possible. We must remain diligent in following all the tried-and-true strategies that continue to work. We now have the hope of the added benefit of new therapies to tackle the virus and its variants in the near future.