



FINGER LAKES REOPENING SCHOOLS SAFELY TASK FORCE

Interim Report

March 2021

Local safety measures created through community collaboration helped schools across the Finger Lakes region remain open and secure for students during the COVID-19 pandemic.



A task force composed of more than 40 public health, health care, education, government and nonprofit leaders — as well as parents — has been working to ensure learning continuity for all K-12 students, including those who live in poverty or who have special needs. Convened in July 2020 by Common Ground Health, the **Finger Lakes Reopening Schools Safety Task Force** was formed to ensure the physical and emotional health and safety of students and their families and education professionals, as schools navigated the unprecedented process of reopening in the midst of the pandemic.

The cross-sector planning group conducted its work via three work groups: communications, resource hub, and health and medical advisory. It focused on schools in the 13 counties of Allegany, Chemung, Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Orleans, Schuyler, Seneca, Steuben, Wayne, Wyoming and Yates.

In six months, the task force achieved numerous accomplishments, as outlined in this interim report. Most notably, in-school COVID transmissions were kept at a minimum. When Governor Andrew Cuomo declared Monroe County a yellow zone in November 2020, all schools were required to test 20% of students and staff for the coronavirus. While the countywide positivity rate at the time was **more than 6%**, Monroe County schools achieved a positivity rate of **just .018%**. In Wayne County, only one probable school transmission occurred out of 100 positive cases among students and staff.

Keeping Kids Healthy

Almost all COVID-19 infections in children have occurred OUTSIDE of school. Let's do our part to keep COVID-19 out of schools!

Masks stop the spread of germs. Outside the house, cover your nose and mouth!



Avoiding large crowds is the best way to stay safe. When you do go outside, remember to greet your friends from six feet!



Being sick is no fun! If you feel sick, let someone know and stay home until you feel better.



Be a germ buster! Wash your hands often with soap and water.





Standard communications for families

Important information was communicated directly to area families using multiple languages and tailored to different literacy levels.

Several infographics were created to convey messages simply on such topics as how to help students wear a mask properly, tips for keeping children healthy and what to do if in quarantine or isolation. Guidelines for returning to play and exercise after a COVID infection were advanced with guidance from the local pediatric community.

Infographics, videos and other information were shared via paid and organic social media on such platforms as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, with some posts reaching more than 11,000 people.



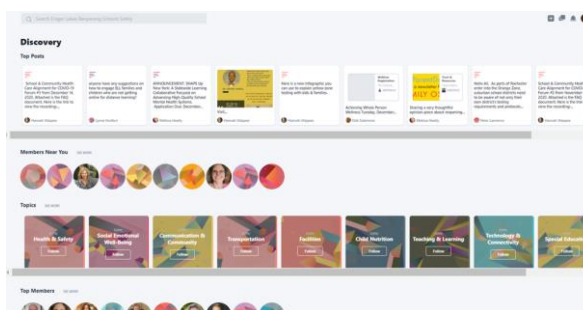
Recommendations for implementing state guidelines

Guidance documents were issued providing local recommendations based on New York state guidelines. Local recommendations ranged from face coverings and physical distancing in schools and on school buses, to how to bring students back to school after a positive test.

The task force also played an advocacy role on behalf of local schools. In response to Governor Cuomo announcing that orange-zone-designated schools had to close and test 100% of their students, the task force successfully pushed for loosening the requirement, resulting in a change to simply test on a regular basis. The group also devised recommendations for personal protective equipment (PPE) for various levels of contact. Following these recommendations enabled area schools to further protect their staff in the process.

Shared resources

A resource hub was created to allow task force members and community members to communicate and share resources with each other. Developed in partnership between Common Ground Health and the S2AY Rural Health Network, the resource hub serves as a social-media-like platform for professionals to post questions to their peers and to share their work, toolkits and other information.



More than 325 members currently participate in the resource hub, sharing information related to 12 different subject areas: health and safety, social emotional well-being, communication, transportation, facilities, child nutrition, teaching and learning, technology and connectivity, special education, bilingual education, school schedules and fiscal support.

Alignment between the education, public health and health-care sectors

A dozen professionals from education, health care and public health collaborate as part of a health and medical advisory work group. Meeting weekly, the group worked to find solutions to various challenges related to the pandemic. For example, the work group collaborated to issue detailed recommendations on how best to implement state guidelines on masking and distancing in schools.

COVID-19 TESTING IN SCHOOLS

NEW TESTING REQUIREMENTS

Governor Cuomo announced that large parts of Monroe County and areas in the Finger Lakes and Southern Tier regions are now in the Yellow Zone due to an increase in positive COVID-19 infections in the area. A "yellow zone" area has added restrictions to further prevent the spread of COVID.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT FAMILIES?

Every school district in a yellow zone must test 20% of students and staff over the two-week period immediately following the yellow zone designation. If a parent opts their child out of testing, the child will not be tested and can continue in-person learning. If the results reveal that the positivity rate among the 20% is lower than the yellow zone's current 7-day positivity rate, testing at that school will no longer be required to continue. If the results are higher than the current 7-day positivity rate, testing will be required to continue on a bi-weekly basis.

HOW WILL TESTS BE DONE?

Tests will be provided by the state. The test is simple, quick and involves inserting a small swab into the front of the nose. Test results will be available on the same day. Students who test positive will be isolated and need to be picked up as soon as possible.

WHAT ABOUT REMOTE LEARNERS?

If a school district is not able to test 20% of its students and staff weekly, it may have to go fully remote. Please watch for updates from your child's district. Students who are fully remote should continue to fill out their health screening each day. They should also contact their health care provider if they experience COVID-like symptoms. Families who do not have a health care provider can contact 211 for a referral.

[LEARN MORE AT COMMONGROUNDHEALTH.ORG/SCHOOLS](https://www.commongroundhealth.org/schools)



Three virtual community forums were held in October, November and December 2020 to help create community standards on screening, testing and response for school students and staff. More than 350 people attended each forum, which centered on such topics as setting standards for dealing with symptomatic or COVID-positive students, best practices for testing students and staff in schools and educating on the implementation of the New York State Department of Health's COVID toolkit.

Following each forum, a set of Frequently Asked Questions was assembled based on questions that arose in the online chat. FAQ sets include answers to common questions, along with definitions of terms like contact tracing, close contact, quarantine and isolation. Two meetings were also held with non-public schools, giving them direct access to their county health department to have their questions answered.

Collaborating on childcare-related issues



An ad-hoc committee was formed to collaborate on issues related to the intersection of school reopening and childcare. It was composed of three members from each of the Finger Lakes Reopening Schools Safely Task Force and the Childcare Task Force convened by United Way of Greater Rochester to work on childcare-related issues during the pandemic.

The ad-hoc committee deployed a survey to get feedback from Monroe County and Wayne County caregivers about their immediate needs and their perceptions of the safety of childcare and out-of-school-time programs during COVID-19.

Of the survey's 175 respondents,

- 61% shared they were uncomfortable having their child participate in childcare and after-school programs.
- 40.5% of caregivers have missed work because of unmet childcare needs.

Survey results are being shared with both task forces, the Greater Rochester After-School and Summer Alliance (GRASSA) and the Early Childhood Development Initiative (ECDI). Partners will create a communications campaign to promote childcare safety and resources for families related to childcare and continue to support the advocacy efforts of the United Way Childcare Task Force.

The group has coordinated on testing and PPE distribution and is working together to understand COVID vaccine hesitancy in the childcare provider community.



Continuing its Work

During the past six months, the Finger Lakes Reopening Schools Safely Task Force was instrumental in helping K-12 schools across the 13-county region remain open safely for students and staff in the midst of a once-in-a-lifetime health crisis.

Accomplishments achieved to date were the result of a consistent, collaborative effort among educators, nonprofit organizations, community leaders, parents and the health-care sector. The task force will continue its work in the coming months to further assist public, private and charter schools in keeping their facilities open — and protecting their students and staff — during this pandemic.

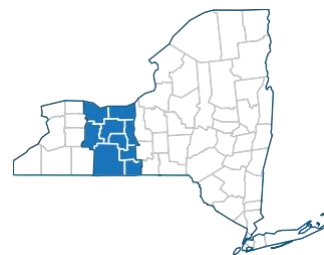
Task Force Webpage:

<http://www.commongroundhealth.org/schools>

Task Force Roster:

<https://www.commongroundhealth.org/collaborations/finger-lakes-reopening-schools-safely-task-force/roster>

ABOUT COMMON GROUND HEALTH



Founded in 1974, Common Ground Health is one of the nation's oldest and most effective regional health planning organizations. Located in Rochester, N.Y., the nonprofit serves the nine-county Finger Lakes region. We bring together health care, education, business, government and other sectors to find commonground on health issues. Learn more about our community tables, our data resources and our work improving population health at www.CommonGroundHealth.org.

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