

TRANSPORTATION CONSIDERATIONS UNDER COVID-19

Introduction

This document is intended to inform school district transportation administrators of best practices for returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the guidance presented here, you are encouraged to review all current federal, state, and local guidelines regarding social distancing, cleaning, and daily operations. These include (but are not limited to) guidelines from:

- the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),
- the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA),
- the Arizona Department of Education,
- the Arizona Department of Transportation,
- the Arizona Department of Health Services,
- the Trust, and
- neighboring school districts.

Districts are also encouraged to review and update their emergency preparedness plans; district pandemic plans (if they exist); and transportation department safety plans and continuity of operations plans.

Health and Safety Protocols: Bus Transport

Social distancing and bus ridership

General considerations. Social distancing for transportation will be a challenge.¹ New guidelines may mean fewer bodies on the bus at any given time, as well as physical distancing at bus stops. (Sending letters of intent to parents as early as possible will help determine the number of students to plan for.) Ways your department can meet social distancing guidelines include the following:

- Use the largest bus available to accommodate social distancing, and repurpose and make use of white fleet vehicles to allow school buses to meet social distancing guidelines.
- Identify and prioritize critical trips and routes, and cancel other services such as field and activity trips.

¹ A six-foot social distancing rule means approximately 13 students can ride a 78-passenger bus. On an 84-passenger bus, allowing 3 passengers per row where there is a passenger at each window and one at the aisle, with the middle passenger alternating sides by row, results in a 62% reduction in ridership. Allowing 2 passengers per seat and 4 per row on an 84-passenger bus reduces ridership by only 30%.

- Consider transporting only special needs, medically fragile, and special program students.

Bus stop logistics. Establish recommendations for how students and parents congregate at bus stops. Will you require waiting passengers to remain in parent vehicles at the stop, or will you allow students to stand together while still observing social distancing guidelines?

*Seating.*² Keep the seats immediately behind the driver and around the bus aide empty in order to protect them both. Mark seats that are unavailable by utilizing colored tape to block or place “Xs” on them. Use floor decals, signs, and visual aids to help students, drivers, and bus aides follow seating and social distancing guidelines. (You may also want to use visual aids to remind passengers not to stand too close to the bus driver.)

Keep in mind that siblings and those quarantined together can sit together. Also consider special needs and bus aide seating proximity to allow for one-on-one attention.

Route and scheduling considerations. Work with other district administrators and governing board members to evaluate the following options for making social distancing requirements more manageable:

- Plan for additional routes.
- Establish separate drop-off and pick-up by zones, grades, or the physical location of the classroom.
- Institute A/B classes and transportation schedules, or establish a.m./p.m. class schedules (full routes run twice daily).
- Divide existing routes into smaller/shorter routes.
- Change bell times.
- Permit ridership only every other day.
- Split schedules by grade, class, or between online and in-person learning.
- Stagger arrival and departure times as much as possible.
- Limit the number of buses in the loading zone during pick up and drop off.

Loading and unloading. Try to create maximum space in loading and unloading zones so that social distancing guidelines can be adhered to. If helpful, use signage, stickers, and ground markings to instruct both riders and non-riders as to where it is appropriate for them to stand, how much distance they should keep between them, etc. For passengers who are unloading on campus, provide immediate access to a supervised and secured “sanitizing station” that includes hand sanitizer or soap and water; toweling; and no-touch waste receptacles to be used before entering the school. Finally, work with your district’s back-to-school task force to determine if a single point of

² For safety reasons, seats may not be removed unless seat spacing meets the requirements in Arizona Administrative Code § R13-13-107 (26) (C) Minimum Standards for School Bus Body.

ingress will be established in order to facilitate health checks. If so, your unloading zone planning will need to incorporate such a change.

Health checks

Determine if you will have a screening or health check protocol before passengers board the bus and if so, who will conduct it. You should also know, in advance, what you will do if a student doesn't pass your protocol and a parent or guardian is not at the bus stop. Will you deny ridership? Keep in mind that you may be able to adapt your current process for students who don't have a bus pass or are attempting to board a bus they don't normally ride.

Personal protective equipment on the bus

Protect the driver and bus aide with a mask or faceguard, a Plexiglas sneeze guard, or a shower curtain that surrounds the staff area but does not limit driver vision. (Check with DPS about use and installation guidelines.) Also, provide cloth or disposable masks to students and other passengers if available.

Cleaning the bus

Introduction. When establishing standards for cleaning school buses, be sure to refer to the CDC [Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting](#) document. Don't forget, too, that all employees working with chemicals must be appropriately trained per [OSHA guidelines](#). Additionally, ensure that only district- and [EPA-approved](#) cleaning products are used.

Cleaning process. School buses have numerous "high-touch" surfaces that need to be cleaned and disinfected after each morning, mid-day, and afternoon route and after each route between schools. These surfaces include seats, windows, and step rails. These surfaces will also need to be sanitized thoroughly each evening. After disinfection activities are completed, windows should be open to allow the bus to ventilate and air-dry.³

Remember that cleaning products and hand sanitizer products should not be stored or transported on a school bus due to exposure and fire risks. Because of this, you may wish to consider instituting supervised "cleaning stations" at all school bus and district facility loading zones. Consider including the following items:

- trash receptacle or bucket to hold supplies,
- disinfecting wipes and wash rags,
- spray bottles filled with approved cleaning solution,
- gloves and masks, and

³ To perform a deep sanitizing of a school bus, consider "spray bomb" products that fully engulf the bus; mist or fog machines designed to kill viruses; and third-party vendors who specialize in sanitizing workplace environments. As noted above, remember to use only EPA-approved products.

- no-touch trash receptacles for discarded materials.

Cleaning stations should be supervised by a school staff member to ensure that students, visitors, and unauthorized staff members are not exposed to cleaning solutions unnecessarily.

Health and Safety Protocols: Employees

Hand-washing

Transportation departments should make a priority of increased hand-washing by employees: (1) before and after routes, shifts, and breaks; (2) after coming in contact with “high touch” surfaces such as buttons and switches, the hand rail, and bus seats; and (3) after putting on, touching, or removing cloth face coverings. If soap and water are not readily available, employees should use a hand sanitizer containing at least 60 percent alcohol.

Personal protective equipment (PPE)

Determine the PPE required for each staff group. Your district may decide that any of the following are to be used by staff: gloves, face masks, goggles, face shields, and disposable gowns. Next, decide whether staff must arrive onsite wearing such equipment, or whether equipment can be applied after arrival. Finally, be clear on the circumstances under which equipment is required vs. optional (when interacting with others, for example, vs. working in isolation).

If your district chooses to supply staff with PPE, establish a process for storing and disseminating the equipment, and for training staff on proper use, cleaning, and disposal. If your department does choose to supply PPE, it is recommended that you procure the items four to six weeks in advance of need.

Sanitation and hygiene

Your department is responsible for keeping facility surfaces clean and disinfected, and having handwashing facilities or sanitizing stations available. Develop and educate staff on specific cleaning and disinfecting procedures, relying on [CDC guidance](#). Post, in areas visible to all staff and students, required hygiene practices and information about how to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Finally, remember that any employees working with chemicals must be appropriately trained per [OSHA guidelines](#), and should follow the instructions on the labels of cleaning products.

Illness protocols

Though it is unlikely, you should prepare for the eventuality that one or more of your employees will experience a virus exposure. Work with your district back-to-school task

force to confirm what the protocol is, and then discuss it with your staff. Elements of that protocol will likely include the following:

Staff should report to their supervisor if they develop symptoms of COVID-19 (e.g., fever, cough, shortness of breath, fatigue, muscle aches, or new loss of taste or smell). If symptoms develop during a shift, the staff member should be immediately sent home. If symptoms develop while the staff member is not working, he or she should not return to work until evaluated by a healthcare provider.

Employees should inform their supervisor if they have a family member at home who is sick with COVID-19, or if they have been in close contact with a confirmed positive case. In such instances, the employee should follow the isolation/quarantine requirements established by the [CDC](#).

Discuss with staff your reporting process when an employee is confirmed to have a COVID-19 infection. If you do inform fellow employees of a colleague's infection, maintain confidentiality as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). When instructing employees on how to proceed following a confirmed workplace exposure, draw on the [CDC Public Health Recommendations for Community-Related Exposure](#).

Explain your district's position on employees who do not believe it is safe to come to work. You will likely want to become familiar with the benefits non-working employees may be entitled to, such as unemployment benefits, FMLA, paid time off, or any other form of paid leave available at the worker's discretion. Make sure your department is following the expanded family and medical leave requirements included in the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#).

Finally, convey that failure of employees to comply with established protocols and policies may result in their being sent home and asked to remain there.

Health and Safety Protocols: Considerations for Testing and Driver Training

Introduction

Before administering any training to a student or employee, all training organizations should develop, post, and provide in writing (upon request) a plan that demonstrates conformity with the CDC's social distancing and [workplace sanitation](#) guidelines. The plan should also include policies regarding PPE utilization and COVID-19 safety training.

Setting expectations

When testing or training is scheduled, staff should set expectations for participants: Health and safety are paramount, and training will be rescheduled if necessary. Participants should be expected to follow basic infection prevention measures before and during training or testing. Specifically, trainers, trainees, and test subjects should:

- skip training or testing and stay at home if they are sick;
- undergo temperature checks with a no-touch thermometer before being permitted to participate;
- observe frequent and thorough hand washing or, if soap and running water are unavailable, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer or wipes containing at least 60% alcohol;
- cover coughs and sneezes;
- maintain social distance and wear cloth face coverings (training organizations can facilitate the former by staggering training schedules, dividing trainees among multiple trainers, etc.);
- use tissues and discard them in no-touch trash receptacles; and
- limit use of cellphones and electronic devices during training.

Additional safety considerations

When trainees or test subjects arrive, they should be asked if they have had any symptoms of illness within the past 72 hours. If a student or test subject indicates having experienced symptoms, or appears to be exhibiting symptoms of illness at any time during the training or test, he or she should be dismissed. The training or test can be terminated and rescheduled as appropriate.

During the on-road portion of in-cab testing and training, the windows of the vehicle should be rolled down sufficiently to create airflow through the cab of the school bus. Social distancing should also be observed whenever practical—for example, during the pre-trip inspection and range driving portions of training and testing.

For in-cab training and testing, trainees and test subjects may clean and disinfect the interior of the vehicle with disinfectant or sanitizing wipes, if available.

Department Management

Transportation department: the new look

Think about your current dispatch, routing, and transportation office logistics. What needs to change under new social distancing guidelines? Do you need to put up cubicles, partitions, or panels? Do you need any special markings or signage to encourage social distancing? Now is the time for discussions with your HR and maintenance departments to determine what supplies will be needed and what additional steps will be taken in preparation for the school year.

Third-party vendors

Review Joint Use Agreements and leases with any third party; identify rights and obligations; and make amendments as needed. For example, you may experience increased cleaning fees to keep facilities at desired cleaning levels, or you may need to

review a contracted transportation vendor's social distancing and cleaning protocols to ensure they meet your new, stricter guidelines. It's also important for you to communicate with your vendors regarding any updated protocols, including screening or health checks.

Hiring and retention

Recruiting in today's world. Even during "normal" times, it can be challenging to find interested, qualified bus driver candidates. Under current circumstances, your department may need to be recruiting continuously, using both traditional and alternative approaches. Consider job fairs, drive-the-bus events, and advertising on social media if you haven't already. Also, restructuring benefits packages to be more "a la carte"—such as higher hourly rates if the employee rejects healthcare coverage, or new-hire bonuses—may be attractive to prospective bus drivers. Finally, when you do find an interested candidate, consider using online platforms such as Zoom and Google Hangouts, as well as standard teleconferences.

Retention and incentives. When it comes to keeping the staff you've got, consider retention incentives for things such as attendance, longevity, and accident-free driving. Bonuses or extra incentives may be just the thing that keeps your bus drivers willing to show up every day and do their jobs under any new, stricter workplace guidelines.

Staying connected

Communicating with staff. Involve your transportation staff in conversations about existing health practices and any needed changes, and then communicate those changes to staff before they are implemented. They will appreciate being included, and they may be more likely to return to work, and stay there, if they believe the district is taking health and safety seriously. Remember, too, that you will need to train your staff on any new health and safety guidelines your department has instituted for the new school year.

Communicating with parents. Before school starts, you may want to survey parents—even informally—to assess their wants and needs regarding transportation safety. Then, be sure to keep parents and guardians informed of steps you're taking to protect their children. For example, if your district is going to screen students for COVID-19 symptoms and history of exposure, you'll want to communicate the process to parents, including what you'll do about any adverse results.

Special consideration will need to be given to students with special health vulnerabilities. Their parents will want to know about the steps you have taken to mitigate the spread of germs on school buses. Such information might include:

- how frequently your buses are cleaned and disinfected (note that some parents will want to know if you are using green and safer products);

- what steps you're taking beyond cleaning and disinfecting the bus—for example, providing hand sanitizing stations at unloading zones, or providing protective equipment for drivers and aides; and
- whether you'll continue any new measures once the crisis begins to subside.

Finally, be sure to remind parents of things they can do at home, e.g., reinforce hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, monitor symptoms, etc.

Remember, parents and guardians are extremely important partners in promoting safe, healthy practices. This makes open, frequent communication with parents essential.

Budgetary concerns

Finally, remember that any changes you make to your facilities, your routes, or your daily operational flow may affect your overall budget. Consider how adding cubicles, offering incentives, and other needed changes will impact your budget, and prepare to answer those tough questions now. If you can meet daily routing needs under the new social distancing guidelines, but only at a higher daily operating cost, do you need to consider eliminating non-critical transportation services such as field trips and extra-curricular activities? Thinking about such logistics before school starts will help avoid problems as the year progresses.