



## IPHA Statement on Iowa's Return to Learn Plans

Media Contact:  
Lina Tucker Reinders, Executive Director  
515-491-7804 • [Lina@IowaPHA.org](mailto:Lina@IowaPHA.org)

### Iowa's Back to School List: Mask Mandate and Local Control

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In ideal times, children learn best and thrive in school. These are not ideal times. This is a pandemic. The public health crisis we are facing is causing stress, fear, and uncertainty among parents, teachers, and administrators. Iowans deserve Return to Learn plans that are based on the expertise of our public health leaders and are flexible to meet the needs of each community. A successful school year requires trust in the public health system, and that trust must be reinforced by elected and community leaders across the state.

Iowa's cases of COVID-19 are on the rise, and we are seeing the grave consequences of not implementing or maintaining the public health safeguards needed to mitigate this trajectory. Coronavirus is a novel virus. That means it is new and we are learning. The precise job of public health professionals is to learn as much as we can about the spread of disease and how to prevent it. As we learn, we make recommendations; recommendations based in science and predicated on prior experience.

In the case of the novel coronavirus, we are learning as we go and, therefore, must adapt as we learn. Adapting is not waffling; it is following the science as we observe, study, and learn. It is not possible to develop a perfect plan for a perfect storm, and indeed, we are in the eye of a perfect storm. We cannot let politics or perfection get in the way of plans that will protect Iowans, even if they need to be adjusted along the way.

Here is what we know we can do to prepare in this moment:

First, it is time for a mask mandate in Iowa. Short of a statewide mandate, cities and counties must be allowed local control to follow the evidence and put in place mitigation strategies to protect their residents.

Second, school districts must have the flexibility to conduct the school year as best suits their communities. We must trust their ability to deliver exceptional educational content, whether in person or online, while meeting the health and safety needs of all involved – kids, teachers, nurses, custodians, and beyond.

Finally, schools and public health must be supported to work in trusted partnership. This has been happening across the state, resulting in Return to Learn plans tailored to the needs of each district with the best interest of our children in mind. These partnerships will also enable the expedient contact tracing that will be necessary to contain an outbreak when - not if - it occurs.

No one is denying the path ahead will be difficult. The challenge in front of us is to provide as safe of a learning environment and workplace as possible for our children and school district employees. This year will be like no other, but Iowa's public health community and school administrators are committed to the challenge. Local control, based in solid partnerships between leaders in public health and education, will see us through the storm. So, put on your mask and let's get to work on the future we all want—thriving Iowa children, families, and communities.

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IPHA is a statewide nonprofit, nonpartisan organization with a collective voice of more than 400 members that advances public health issues and health equity for all Iowans through evidence-based resources, education, and advocacy. Our mission is to unite and strengthen the voice for public health in Iowa.

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501 SW 7th St., Ste. G • Des Moines, IA 50309 • 515.471.7804 • [IowaPHA.org](http://IowaPHA.org)