

A Strong and Healthy Start FAQ: Transitioning from Step II to Step III

Purpose

On September 26, 2020, based on a joint determination by the Vermont Agency of Education and Department of Health, Vermont will transition from Step II to Step III as defined in [A Strong and Healthy Start: Safety and Health Guidance for Vermont Schools, Fall 2020](#). The distinctions between Step II and Step III are enumerated in that guidance. This FAQ is meant to expand upon and further clarify those distinctions.

Q1. What do you mean by “Step II” and “Step III”? What are the step levels?

The step levels, as they pertain to schools, are defined as:

- **Step I:** Schools are closed for in-person instruction. Remote learning opportunities should be provided for all students. Support provision of student services such as school meal programs, as feasible.
 - **Step II:** Schools are open for in-person instruction with enhanced physical distancing measures and for children who live in counties that are eligible for quarantine-free travel.
 - **Step III:** Schools are open for in-person instruction with distancing measures. Restrict attendance to those from limited transmission areas (counties eligible for quarantine-free travel) only.
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Q2. How did you decide to move from Step II to Step III?

The Agency of Education and Health Department determined a step level change was appropriate based on a consideration of two variables.

- **The first variable is the overall health conditions for the virus in Vermont.** In spite of the few cases in schools, the conditions remain very positive. The cases we have seen in schools were the result of individuals contracting the virus in a community and then attending school. To date, we have not seen transmission of the virus in schools.
 - **The other variable is an assessment of to what extent schools are able to implement required health guidance.** We measure this subjectively through anecdotal observation based on our frequent, if not daily, conversations with principals and superintendents.
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Q3. Does the transition to Step III mean schools are relaxing on COVID-19 precautions?

In terms of school operations, Step III should not be viewed as a relaxing of the necessary mitigation strategies schools need to follow. All of the basic, critical mitigation strategies such as staying home when you are sick, completing the daily health check, wearing a facial covering,

physical distancing when feasible and washing hands frequently remain in place and must be followed.

Q4. My school is operating in a hybrid model. Does that change with the move to Step III?

The change in step level does not change to what extent a district may offer in-person instruction or not. That decision remains a decision for the local school district.

Q5. Can schools remain at Step II if they do not feel they are ready for Step III?

No. Step levels are determined by the state per the [Decision Making for School District Operations guidance](#). It is important to note that under Step II, schools had some flexibility in terms of how to implement the required mitigation strategies. Step III provides greater flexibility. For example, under Step II, schools should not use their cafeterias for feeding students. Under Step III, schools "may" use their cafeterias but are not required to do so.

Q6. How do buses and transportation change in Step III?

Schools in Vermont opened at Step II statewide, with the exception of buses and transportation, which started at Step III. So, in a practical sense, schools will not necessarily make any changes to their transportation procedures when schools transition to Step III on September 26.

However, the health and safety guidance does make distinctions between Step II and Step III for transportation if that becomes necessary in the future:

- In Step II, schools should create physical distance between students, stagger drop off and pickup to minimize gathering of students, and create more bus stops to minimize number of students waiting together.
 - In Step III, students should be spaced out for the number of riders, and physical distance should be promoted between students at bus stops.
 - The [Health and Safety guidance](#) includes additional general requirements and recommendations on transportation relevant to both Step II and Step III.
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Q7. Will we have greater flexibility in grouping students under Step III?

Yes. Pod configurations remain an important consideration both for viral spread and contact tracing. However, strict adherence to this model is not required under Step III. This means schools have additional flexibility for grouping students by academic subject, which is an important consideration for high schools.

In general, the distinctions between Step II and Step III for pods/student grouping are:

- In Step II classes should be kept together with the same group of students and teachers each day. Mixing between groups should be restricted, spacing between desks and bedding to six feet apart, with three feet acceptable PreK through Grade 5. Turn desks to

face same direction, prevent students from mingling with other classes at recess, close staff/teacher lounge, hold virtual meetings with students, families and staff, rearrange employee workstations to separate by six feet.

- In Step III, consider keeping classes together to the same group of students each day, and continue to space out seating and bedding to the extent possible.
 - The [Health and Safety guidance](#) includes additional general requirements and recommendations on student grouping relevant to both Step II and Step III
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Q8. What does this change mean for communal spaces, like the gym and cafeteria?

In Step II communal spaces like gymnasiums and cafeterias should be closed for intended use and used only for overflow classroom space to allow for physical distancing. Limit school sponsored gatherings, events and extra-curricular activities to those that can maintain physical distancing, support hand hygiene and restrict attendance from higher transmission areas.

In Step III, if possible, keep gyms and cafeterias closed. However, they may be used for their intended purposes in smaller groups, staggering use, and cleaning and disinfecting between uses.

[Health and Safety FAQ 7: Physical Education](#) offers further clarification on the use of the gymnasium in Step III:

When schools are open for in-person instruction with distancing measures (Step III), gymnasiums may be used for their intended purposes in smaller groups, staggering use, and for physical education instruction that involves minimal physical exertion (for example, yoga or elements of dance (e.g., repetition and rhythm)) and that is aligned with health and safety guidelines. If multiple classes will use the space, stagger use with at least one hour between use by different groups. Even in Step III, it is strongly preferred to take students outside whenever possible, where they can be more active in a safer environment.

Q9. Do we have to use the cafeteria if meals in the classroom are going well?

No, you do not need to use the cafeteria. In fact, the guidance advises that, if possible, schools should keep the cafeteria closed for its intended use.

After the transition to Step III, students may again eat in the cafeteria with specific precautions. However, administrators and food service directors are advised to carefully consider this option before making a change. If the current model of meals in the classroom is working well, it may be disruptive to return to the cafeteria. In addition, if schools need to move back to Step 2 quickly at a later date, changing back could be even more disruptive.

Among other options, schools can consider continuing meals in the classroom for breakfast or lunch, while using the cafeteria for the other meal. Schools could also have students go to the cafeteria to get their meals before returning to the classroom to eat – an option that is already allowed under Step II.

Q10. If we do move some or all our meal service to the cafeteria in Step III, what should that look like?

If schools do move meal service to the cafeteria in Step III, meals should not be self-serve. If eating in the cafeteria, students should be assigned seating with their classroom or pod, ideally always sitting in the same place. Steps should be taken to ensure physical distancing when waiting to receive meals and while seated, staggering classrooms going through line or cafeteria to reduce interactions and number of students waiting. If pin numbers are used, staff should punch pins, and if ID cards are used to count meals, they should be sanitized between uses. Sneeze guards should be installed in the cafeteria. Please refer to the Food Service Section of the [Strong and Healthy Start guidance](#) for additional health and safety guidance on meal service.

Q11. What does the transition to Step III mean for sports?

AOE guidance on [Fall Sports Program for the 2020-21 School Year](#) states:

If permitted under “Guidance for Specific Types of Sports”... school-based fall sports programs may initiate interscholastic games, meets and competitions when Vermont schools reach Step III as described in the Strong and Healthy Start guidance.

The date for the Step II to Step III transition (Sept. 26, 2020) is on a Saturday to permit the start of interscholastic competitions over the weekend. This gives our student athletes an extra weekend for what has already been a shortened season.
