

Your Question:

A state legislator asked what states and jurisdictions are looking at as benchmarks for distancing within classrooms.

Our Response:

Education Commission of the States continuously tracks and summarizes enacted and vetoed legislation on a wide variety of education policy topics and maintains a watchlist to track legislation from introduction for selected topics. In the wake of COVID-19, we have added education-related COVID-19 legislation to our [state policy tracking](#) and our [watchlist](#). ECS also maintains a [COVID-19 Update](#) that includes information on federal responses and state orders and guidance, as well as student health and wellness.

As state leaders consider ways to safely reopen schools amid the Covid-19 pandemic, many grapple with ways to keep students and staff safe. Physical distance in classrooms is one consideration among many being discussed by policymakers as schools prepare for the fall semester.

Physical Distancing Recommendations

The **American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)** [recommends](#) that desks in elementary and secondary schools be placed 3-6 feet apart when feasible. The guidance notes that 3 feet of physical space may provide the same benefits as 6 feet, “particularly if students are wearing face coverings and are asymptomatic.”

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [recommends](#) at least 6 feet of physical space when feasible, including with seating/desks and in the hallways, and recommends physical barriers when this recommendation is not feasible.

Harvard School of Public Health released a report titled, “[Risk Reduction Strategies for Reopening Schools](#)” and recommends keeping, “at least 6 feet between individuals, as much as possible, for as long as possible.”

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** [recommends](#) at least 1 meter (approximately 3 feet) between everyone present at school.

State Examples

Many states released guidance on school reopening for fall 2020, with many mentioning physical/social distancing protocols. State examples are below, though ECS has not completed a comprehensive 50-state scan.

- **Alaska:** [Smart Start 2020 Guidance](#) recommends 6 feet of social distancing in the classroom in medium- and low-risk environments.
- **Arizona:** CDC recommendations of at least 6 feet of physical distance, when feasible, are embedded within the state’s [Roadmap for Reopening Schools](#). However, Gov. Ducey also issued an [executive order](#) that adjusted the school start date from July 1 to Aug. 17.
- **California:** [Reopening guidance](#) cites the CDC recommendation of 6 feet of physical distance between individuals for consideration by local educational agencies, for districts deciding to return to in-person school. The physical distance measures are listed as part of a checklist meant to support local leaders in their collaboration with school communities and health professionals about reopening.

- **Illinois:** [Guidance](#) from the Illinois State Board of Education encourages localities to, “develop procedures to ensure 6-foot physical distance from other persons as much as possible.”
- **Kentucky:** The state department of education released [COVID-19 Considerations for Reopening Schools: Workplace Health and Safety](#). The document encourages social distancing of 6 feet to be practiced as much as feasible in the school setting and provides some recommendations that may help maintain this distance, such as utilizing markings on the floor and having assigned entrances and exits.
- **Massachusetts:** The state department of elementary and secondary education [Initial Fall Reopening Guidance](#) suggests that schools should aim for a physical distance of 6 feet but notes that 3 feet is the minimum distance allowed. The guidance cites the WHO recommendations for this decision and points to guidance in other countries.
- **Minnesota:** The Minnesota Department of Health released a [document](#) with requirements and recommendations for three school scenarios (in person, hybrid and virtual). The department requires schools to “create as much space between individuals as possible during the day” for in-person and hybrid learning scenarios, but recognizes that “it is not always feasible to have 6 feet of social distancing during primary instructional time in the classroom.” The document outlines requirements for localities that include providing social distancing floor and seating markings, reviewing and evaluating classroom capacity with the goal of creating as much spacing between people as possible, and marking 6 feet of spacing in other areas where students and staff may congregate.
- **Pennsylvania:** [Preliminary Guidance for Phased Reopening of Pre-K to 12 Schools](#) requires schools to develop a health and safety plan (in the “[yellow](#)” phase) that includes protocols that allow for 6 feet of distance between students and staff throughout the day to the maximum extent possible.
- **Virginia:** Updated [phased reopening guidance](#) notes that schools are encouraged to aim for 6 feet of physical distance, but should implement a combination of face coverings and 3 feet of distance if 6 feet is not feasible. Guidance cites the AAP and WHO recommendations for this decision.