

**DETROIT MERIT CHARTER ACADEMY
2021-22 SAFE RETURN TO SCHOOL &
CONTINUITY OF LEARNING PLAN**

Updated: November 1, 2021

Finalized: March 17, 2022

Overview: Consistent with our charter, we believe that the best learning environment for our students includes regular, day-to-day, in-school instruction provided by a teacher. Our goal is to have a traditional, in-school learning environment for our students if this can be accomplished while keeping students and staff safe and healthy. As we pursue this goal, we continually seek guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) on best practices in mitigating the spread of COVID-19. This document summarizes our school's *Safe Return to School* plan for the 2021-22 school year. As guidelines advanced by the CDC and by state, and local health department change and are released for the upcoming school year, the school will update its plan and practice. These updates will occur every six months, and more frequently if needed.

If necessary, the school is prepared to transition to hybrid or remote learning environments. We are committed to providing all students with a high-quality education regardless of the learning environment(s) we use throughout the year. In anticipation of possible interruptions to in-person instruction, our management partner, National Heritage Academies (NHA), has provided a Chromebook or laptop device to each student. This investment in technology was made to ensure a seamless transition between models when necessary.

Background on learning models: At the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, we knew that changes in our learning model would be required to keep students and staff safe and healthy. We began the school year prepared to operate in various modes as necessary throughout the year. Detailed plans were created around each learning scenario, which included:

- *In-person learning:* a return to a traditional classroom environment.
- *Remote learning:* teaching and learning done completely at home.
- *Hybrid learning:* a combination of in-person and remote instruction.
- *Virtual learning:* teaching and learning in a fully online environment. These students were enrolled in fully online learning regardless of what learning model the rest of the school is using.

These detailed plans were created by the school, its management partner, NHA, and its Board. They were made available for public comment when the Board was reviewing and approving it and documented as the *COVID-19 Preparedness & Response Plan* and *Extended COVID-19 Learning Plan*. The approved plan was posted on the school's website and has been available throughout the year at: <https://www.nhaschools.com/schools/Detroit-Merit-Charter-Academy/en/Transparency-Reports>

Moving forward: As we began the 2021-22 school year, we have continually updated our practices and procedures to address the changing needs and challenges we have faced because of this pandemic.

Personal protective equipment: The school follows CDC, state, and local guidelines for using masks and face coverings. Masks and face coverings can be homemade items or disposable level-one surgical masks. Masks need to be worn by all staff, students, and visitors throughout the day unless an underlying health condition or sensory issue exempts them. If students submit an exemption note from a physician, they can wear a face shield. If students are unable to obtain a mask, additional masks are made available in the school's main office as needed. Staff and students are required to wash cloth facial coverings or dispose of disposable masks daily.

Students are instructed to use masks properly. In situations where a student is refusing to wear a mask properly, we offer education to emphasize the importance of a healthy and safe school community. In the event of continued non-compliance, the school reaches out to the parent/guardian for support.

We will revisit the need to require staff and students to wear masks based on CDC, state, and local health department guidelines.

Social/physical distancing: Social distancing reminder signs are placed throughout the school building. Social distancing floor/seating markings are established in waiting/reception areas. The school uses staggered arrival times and/or multiple entrances/exits to allow for social distancing. Students keep their personal items separate and in individually labeled cubbies, containers, or lockers. Students transition between classrooms at staggered times to allow for social distancing at lockers. Students eat in their classrooms to allow for social distancing.

Hygiene and cleaning: We have made several significant changes with our janitorial service partner, Aramark, such as increasing manpower, changing management structure, improving training, increasing accountability, and adding monthly performance audits. In addition to baseline janitorial services, Aramark also provides additional cleaning services due to COVID-19. These include:

- All high-touch-point locations – light switches, door handles, bathroom faucet handles, and so on – are disinfected and cleaned at least three times a day in accordance with CDC guidance.
- All cleaning materials are EPA-approved for use against COVID-19.
- Aramark provides the school all necessary materials. For example:
 - Aramark is ensuring that each classroom has hand sanitizer, a spray bottle of disinfectant cleaner, paper towels, and instructions on how to properly use the provided materials when additional cleaning/disinfecting is needed in classrooms.
 - Aramark is also ensuring that the school stocks plenty of hand soap to stay ahead of any shortage. Dispensers of soap, hand sanitizer, and disinfectant cleaner are refilled, as necessary.
- All janitorial staff have been trained on cleaning and disinfecting specifically for COVID-19.

We have also updated our Facilities Preparedness and Response Plan (attached as Appendix A). Here are highlights:

- Following CDC guidelines, we have created an action plan to be used if there is a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the school building. This plan includes

disinfection and cleaning tasks based on the timeline of when an individual with a suspected or confirmed case was last in the school building.

- We store cleaning and disinfection products safely and in compliance with standards.

In addition to the added efforts of our provider of janitorial services, we are all joining in the effort to promote safe hygiene habits. Hand-sanitizing stations are provided throughout the building, and handwashing posters offer instruction on, and reinforcement of, proper handwashing techniques. Desks are disinfected in between classes and all hands-on classroom materials are disinfected between each student group. Each classroom has materials to disinfect commonly shared items such as computers and curricular tools.

COVID-19 protocols and reminders are included in each Sunday message to families. Students in grades K-5 utilize seating charts to limit the number of students any given student is near throughout the day for the purpose of contact tracing and limiting exposure.

Family events are outdoors or virtual to limit the number of people gathering in the building.

Monitoring student and staff health: The school cooperates with the local public health department in screening and testing students and staff where required. Staff members complete daily wellness checks before arriving at work to ensure they do not exhibit COVID-19 symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath, or difficulty breathing). NHA has created a daily health-screening app for this check. Staff members use their mobile device to scan a QR code and complete the required screening survey.

We monitor and follow local health department and state recommendations. If an employee or student shows COVID-19 symptoms or runs a fever of 100.4 or higher, they are sent directly home or to an identified isolation room until they can be safely picked up. When the isolation room is in use, the student and any staff member supervising the student are required to wear masks.

Confirmed cases: If there is a confirmed case, the school's Business Partner from NHA's People Services team –

- reports the case to the local department of health if required;
- partners with the principal and NHA's communications team to ensure that proper stakeholders are notified in a timely manner; and
- ensures compliance with all requirements related to employee and student confidentiality and to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA).

Staff and students with probable or confirmed cases of COVID-19 can return to school after they have complied with any CDC isolation guidelines and:

- they have received a negative COVID-19 test; and
- 10 days have elapsed since the individual first had symptoms;

When there are suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases in the building within the last three days, the Facilities Preparedness and Response Plan calls for a move into a Level 3 Response Procedure (see Appendix A).

Vaccinations: NHA has provided us up-to-date information and resources on vaccination in our state and county.

Continuity of Learning for Special Populations: Students with IEPs or 504s access the same learning opportunities offered to general education students. These learning activities and supports address student needs identified in IEPs and/or 504 plans to the extent appropriate. To accomplish this goal, special education providers collaborate with general education teachers to ensure provision of accommodations and modifications (when appropriate) that allow students to access learning opportunities. Individualized accommodations are documented and shared with classroom teachers for each student. Teachers of students who are English Learners (ELs) work with classroom teachers to provide necessary scaffolds to schoolwork to ensure that EL students have access to the core content.

The school complies with the regulations imposed by the state and by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which strives to ensure that all children with disabilities receive an Individual Educational Program (IEP) designed to address their unique needs. All required components of the IEP are addressed, including a description of the student's present level of academic achievement and functional performance. These descriptions cover disability-related needs, goals and objectives, supplemental aides and services, program services, ancillary services, and extended school year.

All students with disabilities are considered general education students first. Each IEP is designed to ensure that eligible students receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and specialized instruction delivered by highly qualified special education staff within the least restrictive environment (LRE). Before school opens, we review registration forms to identify students with current IEPs from any schools they have previously attended. We inform parents of their rights, procedures, and responsibilities under special education law. Decisions about an IEP are made by the school's IEP Team. Required participants on this team include general and special education providers and administrators. Parents are also encouraged to join the IEP Team.

As much as appropriate, children who are disabled are educated with children who are nondisabled. Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that satisfactory education in regular classes with supplemental aids and services cannot be achieved.

To meet LRE requirements, the school ensures that a continuum of placement options is available to students with disabilities, including:

- services provided within the general education classroom;
- pull-out services;
- special classes;
- home instruction;
- instruction in hospitals and institutions; and
- in special circumstances, access to programs and services in settings outside the school.

The Individualized Education Program Team (IEPT) makes decisions about student placement.

Continuity of food services: We meet all guidance and procedures set forth by the CDC and by state and local health departments related to food service models and operations for students. Meals are served in a unitized manner during the school year to avoid contamination. We provide staff additional PPE, including gloves, masks, cleaning chemicals, and hand sanitizer. Sneeze guards have been added to all food distribution carts. Cutlery, seasonings, and sauces are placed directly on individual trays.

In the event of a COVID-19 outbreak, we work with school nutrition agencies and local health departments to ensure that we comply with all requirements. We continue serving food when schools are closed when that is allowed and can be done safely. We continue to provide meal service to the extent applicable. We notify parents when food is available via the SchoolMessenger system (which can send emails and texts to each family), school newsletters and updates, and our website as appropriate.

Mental health, behavioral, and emotional support services and support: Traumatic experiences like COVID-19 can impact learning, behavior, and relationships at school. Research clearly indicates that a traumatic experience in childhood can diminish concentration, memory, and the development of language that children need to be successful at school. The COVID-19 pandemic is not only affecting children's physical health and academic experience but also taking a deep emotional toll. We believe children's well-being comes first, and that young people, like adults, learn best when they are happy, safe, calm, and cared for properly.

As educators, we must do everything possible to reduce the effects of trauma so that students can learn at an optimal level. Trauma does not discriminate between urban and suburban students because people will perceive threats like COVID-19 in their own way. It is imperative that our organization continue to nurture the hearts and minds of our children and staff and show a thoughtful, innovative approach in doing so.

NHA's Leadership Summit, held during the summer, included a general session to discuss steps schools can take to become a Trauma-Informed School. Leadership teams learned how to prioritize re-establishing connections and safety (both physical and emotional), to carry out interventions for Tiers 1, 2, and 3, and to teach social and emotional skills. There were three additional breakout options made available to staff who may not have taken any courses on trauma in the past. Each breakout focused on the self as the first step to becoming trauma-informed.

In addition, to continue the discussion on trauma, we share information on trauma-informed support throughout the school year by emailing a newsletter, providing additional resources, and sharing talking points with parents, families, and staff.

The school also prioritizes the mental and social-emotional health of staff. Leaders hold one-on-one meetings with employees that help leaders assess employees' physical and mental health. We also have an ethics hotline employees can use to report concerns. Additionally, we give employees free access to an employee assistance program, through which they can access a library of resources for self-care as well as free counseling sessions.