

**DETROIT MERIT CHARTER ACADEMY**  
**2021-2022 SAFE RETURN TO SCHOOL & CONTINUITY OF LEARNING PLAN**

*Updated: March 23, 2022*

*Finalized: May 19, 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 the CDC, state, and local health department guidelines change and are released, the school will update its plan and practice. These updates will occur every six months, and more frequently as 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:** The past two years have given schools historic challenges. In response to these challenges, we have innovated, shaping new ideas to ensure students continue to receive a high-quality education. Many of our innovations and tools can continue to have value long after the current problems ease.

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 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.

As we began the 2021-2022 school year, we have continually updated our practices and procedures to address the changing needs and challenges we have faced because of this pandemic. We have learned that secondary transmissions are rare in school settings and which mitigations strategies work best in our school to help reduce the transmission of COVID-19. Data has shown that our in-person learners learn more and have a much greater likelihood of testing proficient. We will continue to prioritize in-person learning while remaining prepared to adjust course if the need should arise.

**Personal protective equipment:** The school follows CDC, state, and local requirements for using masks and face coverings.

Masks need to be worn by all staff and students throughout the day unless an underlying health condition or sensory issue exempts them. Reusable masks have been provided to the school for staff use. If students are unable to obtain a mask, additional masks are made available in the school's main office as needed. All students must wear masks whenever they are outside the classroom for reasons such as transitioning and arrival/dismissal, and when social distancing cannot be maintained. 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.

Visitors/volunteers are allowed by appointment only and are required to wear a face covering when inside the building.

**Social/physical distancing:** Social distancing reminder signs and one-way traffic floor markings (where possible) are placed throughout the school building. Social distancing floor/seating markings are established in waiting/reception areas. Plexiglass barriers are utilized in the front office and are used for small group instruction at kidney tables.

The school utilizes staggered entrance/exit arrival and dismissal procedures to assist with social distancing. Students keep their personal items separate and in individually labeled cubbies, containers, or lockers. Students should not be sharing personal materials such as pens, pencils, etc. Each classroom has materials to disinfect commonly shared items such as computers and curricular tools.

**Hygiene and cleaning:** We have made several significant changes with our janitorial service partner, Aramark, such as increasing manpower, changes in management structure, improved training, greater accountability, and 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 once a day in accordance with the CDC guidance.
- All cleaning materials are EPA-approved for use against COVID-19.
- Aramark provides the school all necessary materials.
  - 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. Soap, hand sanitizer, and disinfectant cleaner are refilled, as necessary.
- All janitorial staff have been trained on cleaning and disinfecting specifically for COVID-19.
- Facilities Preparedness and Response Plan (attached as Appendix A)

- 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 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. Handwashing posters instructing and reinforcing proper handwashing techniques are placed in bathrooms. Hand sanitizing stations are available throughout the building.

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.

**Monitoring student and staff health:** NHA monitors and follows all federal, state, and local requirements as it relates to COVID-19 safety procedures. NHA also, in conjunction with our epidemiologist, reviews federal and state recommendations and follows them as necessary to ensure the safety of our students and staff and to ensure the continuity of in-person learning.

If an employee or student shows COVID-19 symptoms, they are sent home or to an identified isolation room until they can be safely picked up.

If there is a confirmed case, the school works with its NHA Business Partner (BP) to report the case to the local health department. If necessary, the BP partners with the NHA Communications team to ensure proper stakeholders are notified timely, while ensuring compliance with employee and student confidentiality and HIPAA requirements. Staff and students with probable or confirmed cases of COVID-19 can return to school after they have complied with current CDC and/or state isolation guidelines.

**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 their IEP/504 to the extent appropriate. To accomplish this, 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. English Learning (EL) teachers 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) ensures 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, including 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 assure 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 previous schools 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. This team has required participants, including 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. 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. Staff are trained on food safety standards on a regular basis and abide by all safety regulations. Students eat in their classrooms or in the gymnasium/cafeteria with appropriate social distancing.

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 affecting not just our children's physical health and academic experience, but it is taking a deep emotional toll as well. 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 need to do everything in our arsenal to reduce the effects of trauma so that students can learn at an optimal level. Trauma does not discriminate between urban and suburban students as people will perceive threats like COVID-19 in their own way. It is imperative that our organization continues to nurture the hearts and minds of our children and staff and show a thoughtful, innovative

NHA's Leadership Summit, held during the summer, included a general session to discuss steps to become a Trauma Informed School. Leadership teams learned how to prioritize re-establishing connections and safety (both physical and emotional), interventions for Tiers 1, 2, and 3, and teaching 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, we share information on trauma informed support throughout the school year via an emailed newsletter to continue the discussion on trauma, to provide additional resources, and to provide talking points for 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 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.