

SANTA FE — All schools could be in full reentry by April 5. All New Mexico school staff members will be offered a COVID-19 vaccine before the end of March as a gateway to further expanding safe in-person learning with a goal of reaching full reentry by April 5, the Public Education Department and Department of Health announced March 8.



The announcement moves New Mexico public schools to the third and final stage of the Public Education Department's COVID-19 Safe Operating Categories. All schools were in the remote category until Sept. 8; most elementary schools were eligible for the hybrid category in the fall; all schools became eligible for the hybrid category Feb. 8; and all schools are now eligible for full reentry, which means all students can return to their school buildings for in-person instruction each school day.

"Our goal has always been to welcome students back to school as quickly and safely as possible. The statewide mobilization to vaccinate all school staff is a game-changer in creating increasingly safe working conditions and school environments for all," Public Education Secretary Ryan Stewart said.

More than 45,000 New Mexicans have registered as educators to receive the vaccine, which includes those in early childhood and higher education. Of the registered educators, almost 15,000 have already received the vaccine as members of previously eligible groups — health care workers; those 75 and older, and those with certain health conditions that place them at high risk for serious outcomes should they become infected.

Public School reentry

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New Mexico currently has 50,864 K-12 school staff members — including classroom teachers, administrators, bus drivers and food handlers.

Once school staff members provide evidence of full vaccination, they will no longer be required to participate in asymptomatic surveillance testing, which is used to prevent outbreaks. Since school reentry began Sept. 8, the overall positivity rate of school staff surveillance testing is one percent, well below the state's five percent target. The positivity rate since the expansion of in-person learning on Feb. 8 is point-three percent.

"We are phasing out what we've been calling 'hybrid' learning, although there will continue to be a fully remote option for those families who choose it," Stewart said.

In no case will a student be required to return to in-person learning, if doing so would violate the requirements of a sovereign tribe or nation, some of which are still in a "lockdown" environment.

Extracurricular activities and sports

Sports and other extracurricular activities may resume immediately at all schools, with explicit safety precautions in place.

For sports, precautions include no congregating during warm-ups or breaks in play; no overnight travel, and masks required for all except when eating or drinking.

Choir and band will be allowed outdoors. Students may not share instruments and must follow COVID-safe practices, such as the use of cloth bell covers on wind instruments. Both singers and musicians must be appropriately masked and must maintain enhanced social distancing of nine feet when playing or singing in groups.