

HEALTH NEWS

u Fact Checked

3 Feet (Not 6) Between Students Is Enough for Schools to Reopen

Written by Amy Jamieson on March 19, 2021 — [Fact checked](#) by Dana K. Cassell

New research suggests that maintaining 3 feet of distance may be enough for students in classrooms when mask mandates are in place. Eye Crave/Getty Images

- **A new study found no significant differences in COVID-19 case rates between K–12 districts in Massachusetts that implemented 3 feet versus those that implemented 6 feet of physical distancing.**
- **Experts say this new data is positive news for schools that struggle to reopen due to limited space for students.**
- **In light of encouraging data such as this, the CDC has updated their recommendation that schools space seats or desks at least 3 feet apart (instead of 6) when feasible to prevent**

ADVERTISEMENT

□

Guidance around how much distance is needed between students [in school settings](#) has shifted.

A [new study](#) led by physician researchers from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center found that physical distancing policies with fewer feet between students may be adopted in school settings without negatively affecting the safety of students or staff, as long as masking mandates are in place.

The study was published in the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*.

The researchers' analysis showed no significant differences in COVID-19 case rates between K–12 districts in Massachusetts that implemented 3 feet versus those that implemented 6 feet of physical distancing.

When asked about the study, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the country's top infectious disease expert, [said in an interview](#) March 14 that this new data suggests 3 feet may be a sufficient amount of distance to implement in schools.

The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) has said desks should be placed at least 3 feet apart, ideally 6.

On Friday, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) updated their recommendations to also suggest it is safe for schools to space seats or desks at least 3 feet apart in classrooms where students and staff are wearing masks.

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

□

What the new research found

The researchers [analyzed publicly available data](#) from 251 eligible school districts during a 16-week period from the time schools opened in September through January.

They looked at the cases of COVID-19 among in-person students and school staffers and compared case rates in districts with 3 feet of distancing with districts that had 6 feet of distancing.

What they found was no significant difference in the number of cases among students or staff in districts with the two different policies.

"[This] is very encouraging," said [Dr. Westyn Branch-Elliman](#), MMSc, an infectious disease specialist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and a clinical investigator at VA Boston Healthcare System, who was one of the authors of the study.

"It means that we can — provided we have other mitigation measures in place, in particular, universal masking — bring students back to the classroom safely with 3 feet of distancing. The practical implication of that is that we can bring a lot more kids back to the classroom, which is great news for them," she said.

This new data is positive news for schools that struggle to reopen due to limited space for students.

"This question of whether or not we need 6 feet has been a major barrier for bringing students back to the classroom," Branch-Elliman told Healthline.

"Even though it's a seemingly small question — do we need 3 feet or do we need 6 feet? — the implications of 3 versus 6 feet are huge in terms of bringing kids back to the classroom," she said.

Masking, handwashing, using plastic barriers in certain areas, and having one-way hallways are some other guidelines the CDC

ADVERTISEMENT

□

"It's very important that as we learn more we adapt our policies and we rapidly integrate evidence into practice," Branch-Elliman told Healthline.

She noted that early on in the pandemic it was prudent to take a very conservative stance on distancing in regard to children.

"But as we learn more, it's critical that we adapt our policies based on emerging evidence, that we are flexible, and that we continue to adapt and adopt to what we are learning," she said.

Branch-Elliman stressed that "masking is probably the most critical intervention for controlling the spread of SARS-CoV-2." She added that across the districts included in the study, there was a near-universal masking mandate.

Therefore, the study addresses the question of the effectiveness of 3 versus 6 feet of distancing among students and staff who are wearing masks.

Branch-Elliman also pointed out that the reduction in the amount of feet needed between students promotes a more normal classroom environment.

If implemented, it may help children adjust more quickly as they return to in-person learning.

"If we can adopt 3 feet and get kids back to the classroom full time, it's a change but it's moving towards a more normal situation for our children," she said.

READ THIS NEXT

Effective Ways to Reduce the Spread of COVID-19 in Classrooms

From managing good airflow to using desk shields, experts say there are a number of effective ways to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19

ADVERTISEMENT

□

[READ MORE](#)

How to Talk to Kids Who Are Fearful of COVID-19

As states ease restrictions and some children return to in-person learning in classrooms, they may experience increased fear and anxiety regarding...

[READ MORE](#)

COVID-19 Updates: Biden Reaches Goal of 100 Million Vaccinations

The U.S. continues to have the most COVID-19 cases and related deaths.

[READ MORE](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



The Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General says COVID-19 scammers are using telemarketing calls, text messages, social...

[READ MORE](#)

No, Fetal Tissue Wasn't Used to Create the J&J COVID-19 Vaccine

Fetal tissues were not used in the creation or production of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine. Instead, fetal cells, which are grown in...

[READ MORE](#)

Here's Where COVID-19 Cases Are Rising and Falling

Experts say they're encouraged by the increase in the availability of COVID-19 vaccines, but they are concerned about the plateau in daily cases.

[READ MORE](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



Long-Haul COVID-19 Symptoms May Appear in This Order

A new poll finds that there may be a specific order for long-term COVID-19 symptoms. Flu-like symptoms, including fatigue, headache, fever, and chills,

[READ MORE](#)

More States Easing COVID-19 Restrictions: How to Protect Yourself

As a growing number of states lift their mask requirements and ease COVID-19 restrictions, health experts weigh in on how people can keep themselves...

[READ MORE](#)

[About Us](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Privacy Settings](#)

[Health Topics](#)

[Find an Online Doctor](#)

[Contact Us](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



© 2005-2021 Healthline Media a Red Ventures Company. All rights reserved. Our website services, content, and products are for informational purposes only. Healthline Media does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. [See additional information.](#)



[About](#) | [Careers](#) | [Advertise with us](#)

OUR BRANDS

[Healthline](#)

[Medical News Today](#)

[Greatist](#)

[Psych Central](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

