

Agile Learning Center NYC's Coronavirus-informed 2021-2022 Plan



New York City's first Agile Learning Center is an independent school for self-directed learners. Students at Agile Learning Center individualize their learning within the context of a supportive community. We have adapted simple tools for self-organization and intentional culture creation to better support young people in engaging with their passions and curiosities while shaping the environment of the school. The Agile Learning Center does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, national origin, or ethnic origin in administration, admission, or any associated activities.

To learn more, visit our website at nycagile.org

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To guide the creation of our March 2020 pandemic response and our 2020-2021 safety plan, **our community centered two main questions: “What do young people most need in times of crisis?” and “What do we know about covid-19?”**

What young people need -- safety, calm, connectivity, play, purpose, efficacy, and hope -- has not changed, though our approaches to meeting those needs have evolved through the past months in response to community capacities and feedback. As much as possible, we centered the needs of our most at-risk community members, minimized schedule changes, shared therapist-recommended practices for soothing anxious stress, prioritized rapport-building and relationship-strengthening spaces, deliberately offered as much open play time as focused productivity time, supported youth having as much agency and success in collective projects as possible, and made time for reflections and goal-setting as ways of practicing hope.

We anticipate the need for this approach will continue through the 2021-2022 school year. Staff also anticipate that youth will also have needs related to in-person socializing skills, navigating conflicts in a shared space, and learning to recognize and live with the impact of grief in our families and community. We have been gathering resources from social workers and adolescent psychologists, putting together lists of books and media that tackle social-emotional development topics, and planning to prioritize open and improvisational play, particularly for the first few months of the school year. We have notes on building restorative practices and an intentional culture around conflict management in our space from our first years together, and we're revisiting them to adapt what will be applicable for our return to more togetherness this year. Finally, we've been learning from deathworkers, child therapists, and organizations like Upaya and GoodGrief that focus on supporting people through difficult times and transitions. There is much to learn as we adapt our practices and environment in response to these newly acute needs, but our study is meaningful, our decisions are intentional, and our support systems are rich, so we feel ready as possible for this challenge.

What we know about covid-19 has continued to evolve, as has the virus itself, over the course of this crisis. In many ways our collective experience since we started preparing for and then made the call to move off-site in March of 2020 has demonstrated, better than any think piece we could have written, that our lives in this rapidly changing world depend on developing our capacities as life-long learners who can both self-direct and collaborate in the face of networked risk. We have been challenged to continuously find, assess, process, and apply vast amounts of new information. We've had to do so quickly and without, for most of us, any background or formal instruction in virology and

the behavior of complex systems like pandemics. As a community that's passionate about learning together, about cultivating curiosity while building the skills to continuously keep learning, creating, and collaborating, we really hope that one of the pandemic lessons that sticks is that these priorities are our future. We need to raise young people practiced enough to confidently reject disinformation, integrate new knowledge, account for the strengths and vulnerabilities of our interconnectedness, stay creative through stress, and effectively organize together. We're fascinated by many topics and varieties of content, including and beyond what is included in a standard K-12 curriculum, but we recognize and hope this experience is making clear to more educators that it's the ongoing development of these personal and social meta capacities, more than a specific number of hours on any prescribed set of subjects, that will enable our youth to navigate future upheavals, whether tied to crises like the pandemic or innovations like social media.

Since March of 2020, we've learned covid-19 is primarily transmitted through aerosols.¹ It moves more like smoke than like glitter or droplets from a spray bottle. Remembering this can help us prioritize various safety measures accordingly. We don't have to stress about just touching doorknobs and deli chip bags, although we'll still take care to wash our hands. We do need to focus on measures like wearing masks, limiting exposure to crowds, improving ventilation indoors, and continuing to spend lots of time outdoors. We've learned that there's more of a risk to young people than originally thought, particularly with some of the emerging variants,² and that someone can pass a symptom-check but still be contagious.³ That means we have to stay mindful of the measures we take to protect each other, because there's still transmission risk even in groups of young and of symptom-free people. We've learned that the vaccines we have access to are highly effective⁴ and safe for people as young as 12.⁵ That means our community members who are or will soon be vaccinated have a powerful way to reduce their risk of serious illness and of transmitting the virus to others. At the time of writing, the most recent local news regards the CDC updating their guidance to call for universal masking in settings like schools due to indications that the Delta variant is highly transmissible, impacts kids more seriously than the original virus, and -- while the currently available vaccines mostly protect against infection and serious illness in

¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00869-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00869-2/fulltext)

² https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7023e1.htm?s_cid=mm7023e1_w&s=03

³ <https://jammi.utpjournals.press/doi/10.3138/jammi-2020-0030>

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<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/is-the-covid19-vaccine-safe>

⁵ <https://www.governor.ny.gov/programs/vaccination-scholarship-incentive>

breakthrough cases -- can be transmitted easily by even vaccinated people who become infected.⁶

Through surveys and ongoing conversations, we have learned about the priorities, vulnerabilities, and possibilities that different members of our school community need us to consider. We have been and will continue to be watching the regulations and modelling of the New York State Department of Health and Hygiene, as well as comparing those with examples and outcomes in other places, such as how we paid attention to how the Delta case impacted youth hospitalizations when it arrived in the UK before becoming the dominant strain here. We'll continue to follow decision-making within the Department of Education and work to balance following their guidance with honoring the expressed needs of our community, such as when in June of 2021 the city announced DOE schools would not be offering off-site learning for the coming school year and we decided with families that we would instead continue to off-site learning as an option to families through at least the first half of the school year.⁷ Finally, we are tracking developing news about the efficacy of currently available vaccines on new covid variants,⁸ as well as projections regarding the potential spike, hopefully the last, currently anticipated for the end of autumn.⁹ It's unclear what will come after that, but we'll hope for the best while staying prepared as best we can for whatever comes.

As things stand, **we plan to reopen, both on-site with precautions and off-site with supports, starting September 8th, 2021.** The first 3 days will be spent getting oriented, setting goals, reviewing agreements, and building the relationships that will be the foundation of this year. The following plan has been designed to be responsive enough to meet community needs and adapt following CDC and AAP guidance as the situation continues to change, though we will continue striving to minimize disruption to kids' schedules and families' childcare arrangements. Of course, so long as the pandemic is ongoing our plans are subject to change with new information, regulations, or other such developments.

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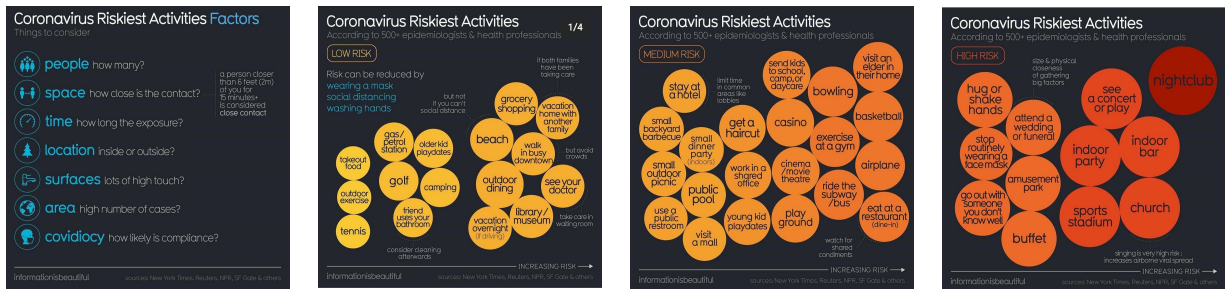
https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/07/29/cdc-mask-guidance/?utm_campaign=wp_main&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter

⁷ <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2021/5/24/22450700/nyc-no-remote-learning-option-next-school-year>

⁸ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)01290-3/fulltext?s=03](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)01290-3/fulltext?s=03)

⁹ <http://www.healthdata.org/covid/video/insights-ihmes-latest-covid-19-model-run>

General Operation



<https://medcom.uiowa.edu/theloop/we-stand-together/the-risks-behind-common-activities>

Agreements

Our basic agreements -- respect self and others, engage in meetings, clean up after yourself, use shared resources mindfully, share your learning, and keep agreements we make together -- remain in place whether we're meeting online or offline, onsite or offsite. Our conflict resolution process remains unchanged as well: try to address the other person directly, ask for support from an uninvolved party, then use the form on the website (or ask your support person for help) to convene a Culture Committee for mediation if the problem persists. With the serious threat that covid-19 poses to our community members and those in our households, virus-management protocols and the various agreements we make to be able to share physical space again safely will need to be taken seriously. We would rather folks be honest upfront about being unable to keep those agreements than to put others in danger, and we commit to finding ways to ensure kids can stay engaged and connected in the case they need to do so from home.

Attendance

Attendance will be taken all days, at both morning and afternoon meetings. We have historically taken daily attendance in half-days at morning and afternoon meetings. In the early months of the pandemic and through the 2020-2021 school year, we instead took attendance based on a daily check-in, to allow for the ways stress and sickness were disrupting folks' schedules. For the 2021-2022 school year, we will return to taking attendance at meetings, whether students attend the meetings in person or virtually. The off-site learning form will remain active online as a communication and documentation option for off-site learning happening outside of school programming. Staff will seek a meeting with families of students whose absence rate is greater than

20%, as before. While regular engagement is crucial for students as learners and community members, our pre-pandemic policy remains in place: we value resting when your body says rest and caretaking the community by staying home with your germs if you're sick, so we won't penalize absences. We just need communication so that we know you're safe.

Communication

We appreciate that burnout, stress, and overwhelm have made it difficult for some folks to keep up with communication since the pandemic arrived in our city. Staff will continue to try to give advance notice of events, repeated reminders across multiple platforms, and as many other accommodations as possible to meet people where they're at. That said, as we resume gathering in person and hopefully move towards shaping the post-pandemic future of our community together, it'll be important for families to be reading the Monday afternoon weekly emails, responding to surveys, and showing up to online meetings as much as possible. Having open lines of communication will also remain crucial in the event that we have to navigate covid cases or exposures among community members who have spent time together in person. At the start of the school year, staff will let you know how to best reach us and we will ask for how to best contact at least one person from each household.

Days/Hours

We will keep our schedule fairly traditional: Monday to Friday, with programming offered online and in-person in the hours between our 9:30 am intention-setting meeting and our 3 pm reflection-sharing meeting. With additional cleaning and reporting remaining necessary, as well as continued interest in outdoor adventuring from both those who plan to return on-site and those who plan to stay off-site, staff will circle up with youth and their caretakers at the start of the year to decide whether to adopt a different schedule on occasion to facilitate devoting days to those tasks and goals. Variable schedule decisions will be made with input from family surveys and with input from students, at weekly check-in meetings, assemblies, though email, and during the first 3 days of the school year. Staff will do our best to honor caretakers' need for a consistent childcare schedule and affordable tuition while centering kids' need for us to offer a variety of activities across settings, lots of outdoor time, and ongoing individual support. Arrangements for extended days will be made in collaboration with families at the start of the school year, as it's still unclear what our needs and capacities will be.

Documentation

We'll make sure at the start of the school year that everyone who needs instructions on how to access and update their Trello account gets set up. For those who are new,

Trello is an online tool for managing tasks and workflows. While we recognize that for some folks keeping handwritten notes and voice memos helps them remember activities better than typing does, the school has a Trello business account which lets us export entries on kids' (and adults') boards to a tidy spreadsheet when we receive requests for records, and this is super helpful for creating transcripts. As such, we strongly encourage kids who are preparing to apply for internships, to transfer, or to graduate to regularly update their Trellos even if they decide to also use other documentation and reflection tools. The facilitators are available to support learners with their documentation, will regularly host reflection sessions throughout the year, and will be modeling taking their own notes through the year, as always.

Holiday/Travel Quarantines

A pandemic change we will be implementing until further notice regards holiday gatherings and travel. We continue to celebrate and encourage young people to take advantage of opportunities to gather with family, celebrate a variety of holidays, and to travel whenever possible. For the safety of your families, chosen families very much included, we commit to working with kids and staff who need to take 10 day quarantines through the year in preparation for flights, visits to grandparents, and similar events. For the safety of our community, folks returning from gatherings or travel, or who share close quarters with individuals who are returning from gatherings or travel, need to take a 10 day pause before returning to on-site activities. If the majority of the community will be travelling or attending gatherings over a holiday, we may move school online only for the week after the holiday events end. Since last year, we've seen gathering spaces like concerts and camps requiring proof of vaccination or a negative covid test before entering, replacing the need for such a long quarantine between exposures to different social groups. We expect to know quite a bit more about the efficacy of such an approach by the time our first holiday break arrives; if the data supports requiring vaccination proof and/or negative tests instead of quarantines and the community prefers that approach, we may change our plans accordingly.

Mealtimes

Historically, we've been big supporters of students and staff having the option to eat and drink as they're hungry throughout the day. We feel really strongly that practicing eating in response to one's body instead of a bell is an important part of becoming self-sufficient in life outside of school, and we appreciate the powerful relationship-building that can happen when chatting over a shared pot of tea. *And* since eating and drinking require taking off our masks, it won't be possible to resume cozy breakfasts together in the backroom quite yet. Staff will work with on-site students to schedule collective mealtimes with extra distancing and ventilation measures in place,

as well as agreements to encourage taking meals to the park and otherwise enabling folks to snack as they please without endangering themselves or each other.

Meetings

Morning and afternoon meetings will continue being offered virtually, and they will resume opening and closing our days in person. We will continue to open each week with some kind of schedule-setting and review together. We will also continue to close each week with our Friday community check-in and change-up meetings. We will be open to moving and changing the meetings in collaboration with the kids as we need to. Large group meetings that include families, staff, and other community members will take place outdoors or online only until further notice.

Online Offerings

Some offerings worked really well online and will continue to be more engaging with large groups online, and we are excited to work with kids and other Agile Learning Centers to explore how to keep those offerings as part of our weekly programming. Most offerings that will resume meeting in person -- such as math, art history, and writing time -- can be simultaneously offered over videocall for off-site learners to participate in, and so we will make those offerings in both spaces. As we reintroduce offerings like kickball, which would be unavailable to those who cannot meet in person, we will work to ensure as a community that there are enough activities available to those young people that they don't end up feeling left out. Some activities, like blowing bubbles and hosting karaoke parties, remain risky in person so will be online only until further notice.

Visitors and Guests

Historically we've enjoyed welcoming families and visitors into our space on a regular basis, as well as travelling together to be visitors at other ALCs in the network. For a little while longer, we will limit such activities to help keep our community safe. We'll look for ways to gather with families and to collaborate across ALCs in digital or outdoor only ways. We'll redesign our drop-off and pick-up flows to minimize the number of people entering and leaving the physical space. We'll require visitors or volunteers who will be indoors with us for a significant period of time to be vaccinated or have a recent negative covid test, and we'll be asking that everyone indoors together remain masked and follow our additional safety agreements.

Gathering Again: How Will Things Work?



To Review

Common covid-19 symptoms to check for before leaving home include:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea

This is not an exhaustive list. Those showing symptoms need to contact a healthcare provider about testing, quarantining, and care. At present, it appears kids and vaccinated individuals with breakthrough cases often have either mild symptoms or no symptoms at all. The city continues to host free test sites in all boroughs and encourages regular testing to help ensure even asymptomatic cases can be found, monitored, and contained.

Test site information is available at:

<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/coronavirus/get-tested/covid-19-testing.page>

If an individual has been in contact with other members of the school community in person and contracts covid, staff must be notified immediately so they can contact those who may have been exposed with next steps according to current DOH guidance.

Students who show up to a meetup or to school with symptoms will be separated from the group, given a higher quality mask, and sent home. Facilitators will need to have a meeting with the student and their caretakers about helping us with our collective risk management before the student may return to in-person offerings.



<https://medcom.uiowa.edu/theloop/>

Official New York City covid data can be found at:

<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/covid/covid-19-data.page>

Additional data and graphs can be found at:

https://projects.thecity.nyc/2020_03_covid-19-tracker/

The free NYS Citizen Public Health course is at:

https://vod.video.cornell.edu/media/New+York+State+Citizen+Public+Health+Training+Program/1_muufcz3y (and Abby recommends it if you're interested in such things)

Off-site and Online:

For off-site learners, the Virtual Classroom page at <https://nycagile.org/virtual-classroom/> will be kept updated. They can join meetings and events using the school's Zoom account. Where youth have begun exploring use of other platforms for collaborative gaming, video watching, mind-mapping, and other activities, facilitators will work with them on how to protect themselves online while using such platforms to support their self-directed efforts to stay connected across distances.

Off-site and Outdoors:

For off-site and on-site learners, outdoor activities will be encouraged and made available as often as possible. In-person gathering requires household commitment to minimizing exposure risk, staying home if showing signs of sickness, and communicating proactively about household members' covid symptoms or exposure to folks who test positive for the virus. Those gathering for outdoor activities will review and commit to following best practices around mask use, social distancing, and hygiene. The boundaries of the most cautious family represented in the pod will determine the boundaries of the pod when, for example, considering taking a ferry or subway trip to another part of the city together.

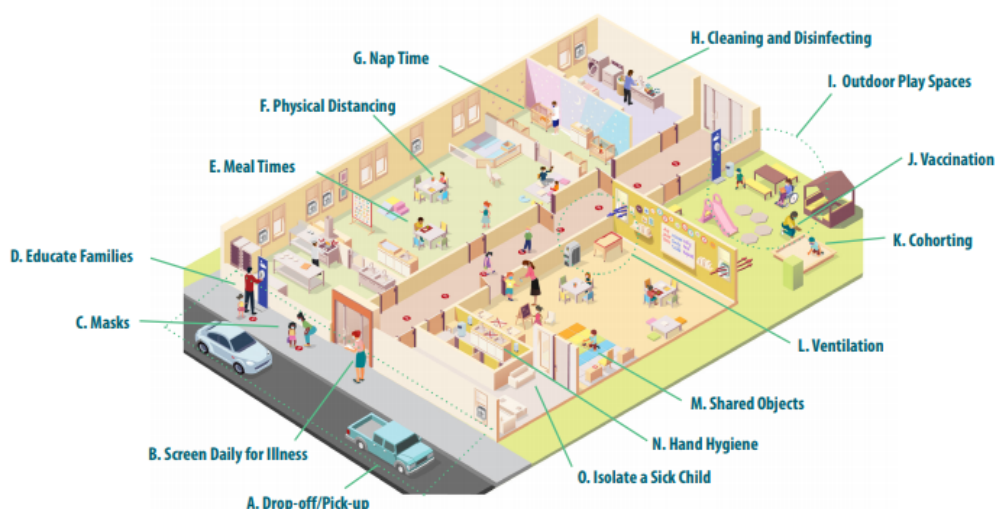
On-site, Indoors:

As we return to offering indoor programming, we do so aware that ongoing caution will be needed to keep our community members as safe as possible. We'll maximize ventilation and minimize crowding. We'll wear masks, increase park time, and find ways to connect with family and friends that don't involve gathering more people into the space. We'll make agreements around eating, cleaning, and attendance that evolve as the research and case numbers do. We hope it will be safe to start relaxing, to start planning potlucks and community board game nights again, by early 2022, but so long as the pandemic is ongoing we will stay attentive and responsive to the situation as it develops.

Protocols

At the time of writing, the DOE most recently emailed heads of schools that they are waiting for confirmation from the DOH but direct schools to refer to CDC¹⁰ and AAP¹¹ guidelines in developing and continuing to adapt our programming plans for the 2021-2022 school year. This plan, first published as a draft in June of 2021, is being updated now [8/2/2021] in response to changes in CDC guidance and that DOE email.

There are many ways to lessen the chances of spreading covid in our community. Together, using multiple measures, there's a lot we can do to keep each other safe.



<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/index.html>

Those participating in online programming are expected to honor our agreements, particularly those around respecting self and others and around caretaking the space. The virtual realm affords us modes of self-expression, creating, exploring, and collaborating in ways that only interacting in person can't. We're huge fans! And we take agreements around online safety, like who a call password gets shared with and whether folks consent to screenshots of their slideshow on jellyfish, very seriously.

For in-person gatherings, symptom screenings, increased outdoor time, improved ventilation through use of fans and air filters, limiting the group size, and consistent use

¹⁰ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html>

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<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

of PPE will be priorities. All staff are fully vaccinated. Distancing agreements, particularly for during mealtimes, will be discussed with kids based on the most updated CDC and AAP guidance at the start of the school year.

Masks must be worn at school gatherings. The most recent information about the Delta and Lamda variants has led the CDC to return to recommending universal masking indoors and outdoor masking around others. Emerging studies will inform our policies for outdoor mask-wearing and for meals, telling us more in the coming weeks about how much more transmissible Delta is and how much vaccinated individuals need to be concerned in various settings. That said, the CDC update mentions -- and we agree -- that peer pressure is powerful. Having a group norm of taking PPE seriously even among those who may turn out to be less at risk without it, for example consistently rocking your favorite Pikachu mask at the park even after getting fully vaccinated, will help encourage our more at-risk friends and friends who live in households with high-risk folks to confidently keep rocking theirs, too.

No one should be attending in-person programming if they have symptoms of covid or other such illness, but in the event a student arrives and develops symptoms, they will be given a higher quality mask and separated from other kids in a well-ventilated space until it's been arranged for them to be picked up. Fully vaccinated facilitators will be available to support them and to clean the space after.

Based on <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/quarantine.html> and subject to change along with updates, below are protocols for exposure and positive cases. At the time of this writing, the page was last updated 3/12/21.

Exposure to someone within 3 days of their developing covid symptoms or testing positive must be reported to the school. The exposed person should isolate for 10 days if they're not fully vaccinated or within a 3 month period of contracting and recovering from covid. Those who are fully vaccinated or who are within that 3 month period do not need to isolate unless they develop symptoms.

Development of covid symptoms or a positive test must be reported to the school, and we will immediately notify exposed parties about their status and quarantine recommendations. In most cases, health care providers will clear someone who has contracted covid to stop isolating after 10 days have passed since the symptoms first appeared (or positive test, in asymptomatic cases), 24 hours with no fever and no fever reducing medications, and covid symptoms other than fever showing consistent improvement.

Case numbers in NYC were encouragingly low when this document was first drafted, but they've been rising again in recent weeks. It's unclear what to expect for the future, other than that it seems pretty certain the cold weather and variants will be a tricky combination this fall. With change as our constant, we'll navigate each development as best we can together, guided by the same two anchoring questions we started with: what do kids really need, and what do we know about what we're facing?

In the event that ongoing developments cause us to need to reassess gathering together indoors, we'll work with kids and parents to come up with a plan -- whether returning to online/outdoor gatherings only or arranging for small cohorts to use the space in alternating shifts -- that meets everyone's needs as best we can while following local regulations and keeping the most vulnerable among us safe.

This year will be a challenge, but we're more knowledgeable and practiced than in 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. We'll navigate this new year's challenges and lay the groundwork for our future together. We've got this!

Questions or comments can be send to admin@nycagile.org