

Agile Learning Center NYC's Community Health 2022-2023 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, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, faith, national origin, or ethnic origin in administration, admission, or any associated activities.

To learn more, visit our website at nycagile.org

Published 7/27/2022

As things stand, **we plan to open, both on-site with precautions and off-site through online tools, starting September 7th, 2022.** 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.

Through surveys and ongoing conversations, we 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 modeling of the New York State Department of Health and Hygiene, as well as comparing local guidance with examples and outcomes from other places. 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.

There have been moments when the guidance of these governing bodies has been very helpful, such as when they have distributed graphics to help families know if and for how long they should keep a student home after a covid exposure. There have also been moments where being more cautious than other schools has served us well, such as when in June of 2021 the city announced DOE schools would not be offering off-site learning for the approaching school year and we decided with families that we would continue to offer online participation in programming an option to families through at least the first half of the school year.¹ Doing so allowed students to stay home while sick, after potential exposures to the virus, or as preparation time before visiting high-risk family over holidays, all without having to disengage from school.

To guide the creation of our March 2020 pandemic response and our subsequent safety plans, **our community centered two main questions: “What do young people most need in times of crisis?” and “What do we know about covid-19?”** As of July 2022, we acknowledge the complexity of a moment in which some families continue to experience acute crisis while others have adapted to create a kind of 'new normal' for themselves, to expect and soften the stress of ongoing environmental instability. **So now we ask: “What do kids need?” and “What are our risks and resources?”**

¹ <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2021/5/24/22450700/nyc-no-remote-learning-option-next-school-year>

What young people need after crisis -- 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. Again for 2022-2023, we recognize these needs and commit to centering our most at-risk community members. We have and will continue to layer protective measures to support our collective health, minimize introducing sudden changes, share therapist-recommended practices for stress management, prioritize rapport-building and supportive relationships, deliberately offer open play alongside focused productivity time, support youth having as much agency and success in collective projects as possible, and make time for reflections and goal-setting as ways of practicing hope.

As we returned to on-site and in-person programming, we anticipated that youth would have needs related to socializing skills, navigating conflict, sharing space, and learning to recognize and live with the impact of grief in our families and community. We gathered resources from social workers and psychologists. We listened to disability educators, deathworkers, therapists, and established local organizations that focus on supporting people through difficult times and transitions. We pulled out our notes on building restorative practices and an intentional culture from our first years together, and leaning on these learnings alongside tools like air purifiers and respirator masks set us up for a very successful year. We had no instances of covid transmission occurring at school or school events, many young people ended the year with new friends, and we collectively had a rich year of learning everything from pigeon anatomy to music theory to how to navigate the subway independently. Given these outcomes and the reality that the pandemic continues, we will carry the same lessons and practices into 2022-2023.

In the 2022-2023 school year, we are navigating with the understanding that the highest local risk at the start of the year comes from the BA.4 and BA.5 sub-variants. There's more of a risk to young people than originally² and someone can pass a symptom-check but still be contagious.³ These new covid sub-variants are much more transmissible than those we faced before, though they are still primarily transmitted through aerosols.⁴ Remember, this means they move more like smoke than like glitter or droplets from a spray bottle. **Given this, we will focus on measures like wearing masks, limiting exposure to crowds, testing regularly, and using tools to improve the air quality of indoor spaces.**

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>

⁴ [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)

Our community members who are or will soon be vaccinated have a powerful additional way to reduce their risk of serious illness, though newer variants can be transmitted easily even by and sometimes to vaccinated people.⁵ A positive development since our last plan was published for the 2021-2022 school year has been the approval of more treatments for covid, though these antiviral treatments are still not widely available as we hope they soon will be. A more concerning development has been the realization that Long Covid⁶ is more prevalent and more damaging than most of us initially thought. Taking all this information together, it seems covid has become a more manageable threat than when it first arrived in our neighborhoods, and at the same time getting fooled into pretending it no longer poses any threat could have devastating effects on our lives and those of the people around us.

Additionally, as instances of Monkeypox become more common we have been learning more about this virus to gauge the risk it poses to our community. Contrary to current messaging from some media outlets, the virus does not limit its spread to populations of a specific sexual orientation, sex, or gender. It spreads across many species of mammals, and though it is much less transmissible than covid it poses a significant enough health risk that we need to stay aware and careful while it's spreading locally.

Monkeypox is an orthopox virus that spreads through prolonged close contact either with an infected person's breath or lesions, or with linens and surfaces they've been in contact with.⁷ Symptoms include swollen lymph nodes, fever, and a rash of pimple-like lesions. Infected people are typically contagious from the time the lesions develop until they fall off and scab over. **Given that the virus spreads primarily through physical contact, protective measures will include community education on how to recognize pox lesions, regular sanitization of school surfaces, and emphasizing the importance of regular hand washing and other hygiene-maintaining practices.** We will adjust our response as more information becomes available.

5

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

6

https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Post_COVID-19_condition-Clinical_case_definition-2021.1

⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/poxvirus/monkeypox/clinicians/clinical-recognition.html>

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.

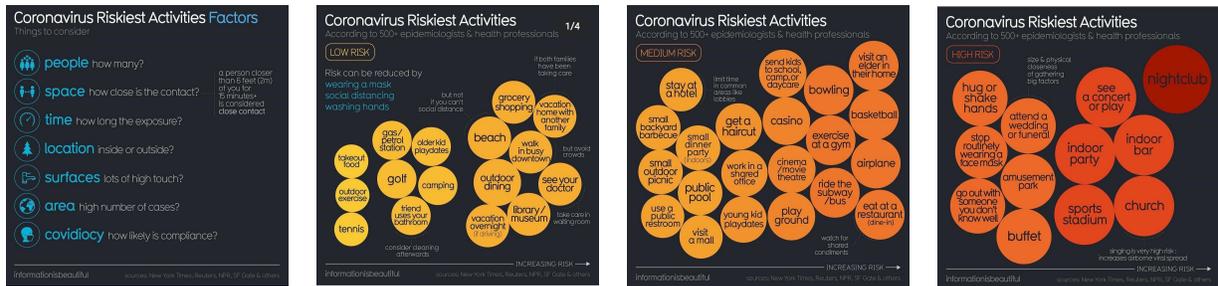
As a community that's passionate about learning together, about cultivating curiosity while building the skills to continuously keep learning, creating, and collaborating, we really hope that one of the pandemic lessons that sticks is that these priorities are our future. We need to raise young people 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.

It's unclear what this year will offer us and challenge us with, but we know by now we're grounded and adaptive. As Dr. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang has commented about humans when reflecting on her research, "The unknown unknown is our ecological niche."⁸ We'll hope for the best while doing what we can to stay prepared and agile in the face of whatever new surprises come our way.

⁸ <https://candle.usc.edu/>

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. The off-site learning form will remain active online as a communication and documentation option for off-site learning happening outside of or synchronous with 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 folks resting when their bodies say to rest and caretaking the community by staying home with their germs if they're sick. Accordingly, we don't penalize absences. If a young person will be late or staying home, staff just need communication so that we know they're safe.

Communication

We understand that burnout, stress, grief, illness, 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 give advance and repeated notice of important dates or events, as well as other accommodations when possible, to meet people where they're at. That said, 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 remains crucial, particularly 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. 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. With additional cleaning and reporting remaining necessary, students wishing to stay later than 4 pm will need to check with facilitators about which days it is possible for them to do so. 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 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 self-isolate 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, are also encouraged to take a week's pause before returning to on-site activities. If the majority of the community will be traveling or attending gatherings over a holiday, we may move school online only for the week after the holiday events end. We've seen gathering spaces like concerts and camps requiring a negative covid test before entering, replacing the need for long periods of self-isolation between exposures to different social groups. We expect to know quite a bit more about the efficacy of such an approach in the light of the new variants by the time our first holiday break arrives. If the data supports test-to-return policies 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 encourage eating where there are extra distancing and ventilation measures in place, taking meals to the park, and finding other ways for folks to snack as they please while minimizing the risk to 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 Thursday community change-up meetings and Friday reflective documentation time. 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 traveling 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 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

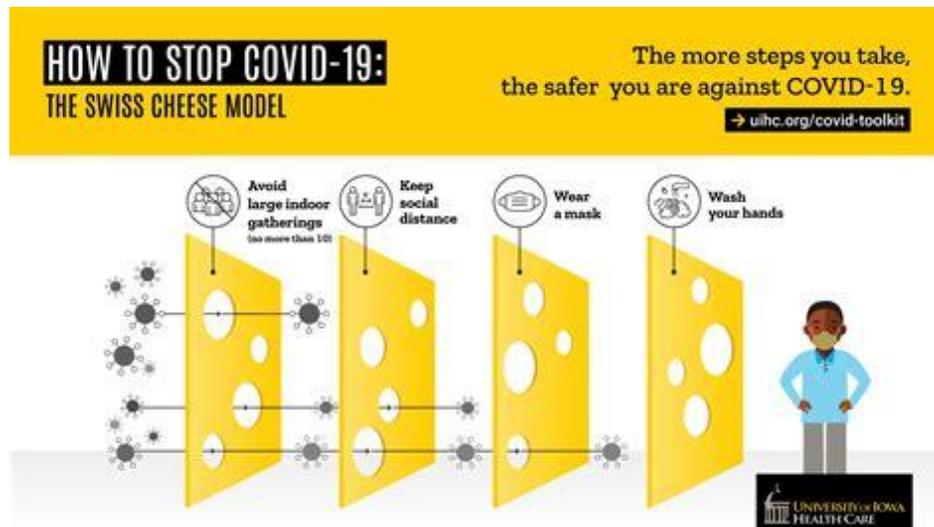
Common covid-19 symptoms to check for before leaving home include:

- 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. Rapid tests are easily available at school and across the city, and regular testing can help ensure even asymptomatic cases are found, contained, and monitored before causing outbreaks.

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:

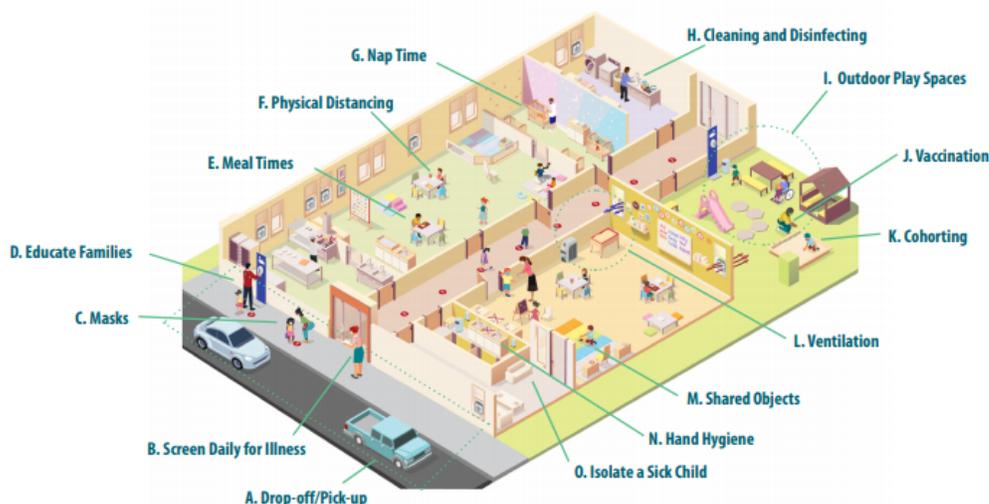
For off-site and on-site learners, outdoor activities will be encouraged and made available as often as possible. In-person gathering requires household commitment to minimizing exposure risk, staying home if showing signs of sickness, and communicating proactively about household members' covid symptoms 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.

On-site, Indoors:

As we return to 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 large groups into the space. We'll make agreements around eating, cleaning, and attendance that evolve as the research and case numbers do.

Protocols

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 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 indoors at school gatherings. The most recent information about the transmissibility of BA.4 and BA.5 supports universal masking indoors and outdoor masking around others. Emerging studies will continue to inform our policies for outdoor mask-wearing and for meals, telling us more in the coming weeks about how much more transmissible these sub-variants are and how much vaccinated individuals need to be concerned in various settings.

That said, 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.

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 5 days if they're not fully vaccinated or within 30 days of contracting and recovering from covid. Those who are fully vaccinated or who are within that 30 day period do not need to isolate unless they develop symptoms; wearing a well-fitted respirator mask and testing regularly through the week after exposure will be sufficient.

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 5 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.

Steps for managing the risk of Monkeypox transmission will include education at the beginning of the year for students and their family members regarding the identification of symptoms and understanding how the virus is spread. Ongoing emphasis on hand hygiene will be paired with regular sanitization of high-touch surfaces in the space, and further measures may be implemented if needed as the situation develops.

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?

This year will be a challenge, but we're more knowledgeable and practiced than in 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022...all years in which we managed to learn and create together safely in the midst of rapidly changing circumstances. 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