

Recommendations for Reopening School Theatre Programs

Theatre Education in the Time of COVID-19





How you deliver theatre instruction may change under the new education normal, but learning outcomes should remain the same.

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We believe that theatre programs are more vital than ever, given their ability to support the social and emotional wellbeing of students in this time of great change and trauma.



INTRODUCTION TO THE GUIDE

The mission of the Educational Theatre Association (EdTA) is to shape lives through theatre education. In the time of COVID-19 we will adhere to that mission. We believe that theatre programs are more vital than ever, given their ability to support the social and emotional wellbeing of students in this time of great change and trauma. We also believe that theatre performance opportunities—a central component to all theatre education programs—should continue to be available to all students, whether in-person or virtually. Therefore, EdTA endorses the safe resumption of school-based theatre activities in all schools.

EdTA has reviewed multiple guides, studies, and expert resources and synthesized them into a series of suggestions for the reopening of theatre classrooms and facilities. This document offers recommendations for how theatre educators can continue to provide meaningful theatre education experiences for their students in the COVID-19 era, as well as programmatic guidance for state, district, and school decision makers who are tasked with deciding how education will be delivered to students in the 2020-21 school year and beyond. It represents the best guidance available at the time of writing.

It's understood that what is applicable for reopening programs may vary from district to district and change over time. EdTA intends to regularly update the guide to acknowledge changing procedures. It's also understood that, as a trained professional educator, you want to offer the very best instruction to your students so they can learn and grow in their knowledge, understanding, and love of theatre. This guide affirms that you can still do that, but also acknowledges that *how* you deliver your teaching may be different than in the past. To that end, the two most important things to bear in mind are:

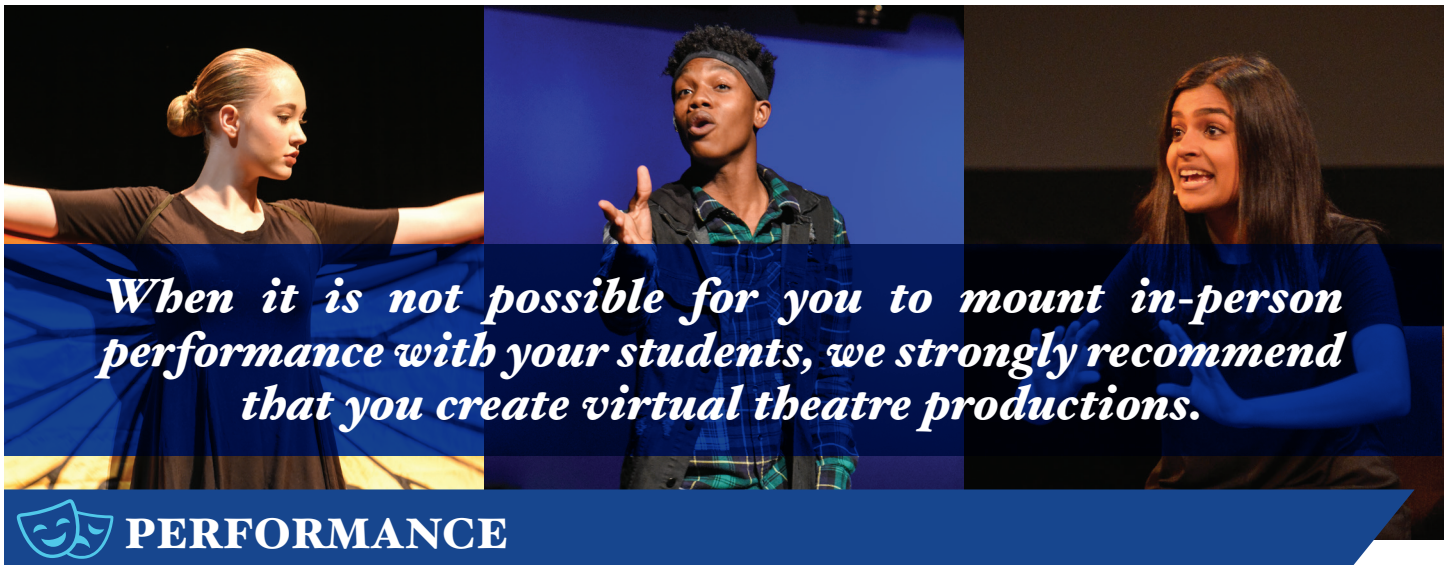
1. *The guide does not seek to replace or contradict the guidelines issued by your state or district public health agencies or the CDC regarding the timing or protocols for how schools should operate in the new normal of education.* You should *always* follow those guidelines, whatever they are. (See the guide's "General protocols for reopening schools" section for CDC guidance.)
2. *There is no expectation that all schools in all states and districts will or should follow every recommendation included here.* Every state is handling the pandemic differently and those differences may even vary district to district. Perhaps your school will return to classes and you will be able to restart your theatre program in a way that's very similar to the past. Conversely, you may initially be conducting your classes and performances entirely through a virtual platform.

Recommendations for Reopening School Theatre Programs offers health and safety guidance for theatre teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic by asking this question: *What does a theatre educator and their program need to minimize risks and ensure students' safety, while simultaneously providing them with quality theatre experiences?* And the guide is mindful of these three additional questions:

1. How can you deliver instruction while adhering to social distancing?
2. How can you adapt instruction for virtual teaching and learning?
3. How can the social and emotional support that live theatre experiences provide be transferred to online learning environments?

To answer these questions, the guide addresses these aspects of theatre education:

- Performance
- Curriculum, Instruction and Resources



If your district public health agency has prohibited the gathering of large crowds, or even limited groups, in confined spaces, you may not be able to produce in-person theatre events. When it is not possible for you to mount in-person performance with your students, we strongly recommend that you create virtual theatre productions. In the months following the outbreak of COVID-19, theatre educators and artists from around the country have proven that it is possible to create and share inventive and engaging work virtually, extending their artistry in new and inspiring ways. EdTA believes that you and your students can also tell theatre stories through this unexpected mode.

If not now, eventually you will be able to resume live, onstage productions. Much of what is offered in this guide regarding traditional, live theatre production addresses different steps that you can take to increase the safety of your students, self, and the audience in the COVID-19 era, along with the tools and resources necessary to do so. Again, these are *suggestions*. We know, for example, it will be a challenge for some schools to provide masks for every student or do the level of sanitizing suggested here. The question you and your administrator must answer is, "What is safely possible for our school and our students, under our state and local public health rules?"

Regarding staged productions in general: multiple research studies have detailed profound concerns over the transmission of the virus through respiratory droplets produced through speech, either spoken or sung, in close quarter environments.

The Educational Theatre Association encourages you to produce theatre that will minimize the risk of infection to students, your audience, and yourself until a cure, vaccine, or effective treatment is available.

The CDC guidelines of frequent hand washing, temperature checks, disinfection of all surfaces, equipment, and tools are all critical to safe, in-person school production. We understand that the sanitization recommendations cited here

are particularly challenging. EdTA strongly advises teachers to meet with their administrators to be certain that district procedures for sanitation includes support for theatre programs.

Rehearsals

Much of this rehearsal guidance is also applicable to performance.

Before you get to that big opening night you must, of course, lead your students through a series of rehearsals. Whenever possible, hold virtual rehearsals. This preparatory aspect of the craft should continue to be part of your theatre program. Bearing in mind your district's public health directives, in the new normal, here are some safety actions you might take to put your students and families at ease with this process:

- Adhere to social distancing (6 feet between actors, technicians, and teachers) by applying a room capacity formula (<https://www.banquettablespro.com/social-distancing-room-space-calculator>) that will calculate maximum capacity based on room size; if necessary, divide rehearsing students into small groups working in separate rooms.
- Everyone should wear masks throughout rehearsal.
- Conduct temperature checks of all students and school personnel entering the rehearsal space.
- Encourage students to bring their own marked water bottles.
- No sharing of food or beverages.
- Wipe down or spray all surfaces—chairs, set pieces, props, rails, technical hardware, etc.—before and after rehearsal, using CDC-approved disinfectants.
- Do not allow any sharing of makeup, costumes, or wigs.
- Launder all costumes and sanitize wigs after each rehearsal.
- Hold larger-cast rehearsals in gyms, cafetorium-type spaces or outside to more easily meet social distancing guidelines.
- Schedule staggered bathroom breaks to ensure social distancing guidelines, based on the application of the room capacity formula.
- Provide a hand-washing station and have hand sanitizer readily available in the dressing rooms, green rooms, backstage and all other production areas.
- Dressing rooms, green rooms, production areas should be sanitized—before and after rehearsals--using CDC-approved disinfectants.
- Students should not share any voice amplification equipment, if possible. Students should avoid touching any curtain.
- Sanitize all technical hardware--microphones/headsets, rigging, sound and light boards, lights and rigging before and after each rehearsal per manufacturer instruction. (For microphone care, see: <https://www.shure.eu/musiciansdiscover/educational/keeping-your-microphone-clean>)
- Minimize clustering of students not directly involved in rehearsal and only students who are required to be at rehearsals should be allowed to attend.
- Avoid unnecessary touching, movement or singing that might increase the transmission of aerosol droplets.
- Provide scripts for each student—ideally digitally—that honor copyright restrictions.
- Meet technical needs (set and costume construction, lights, sound, etc.) through the application of standard safe practice procedures and a staggered schedule that ensures social distancing in all workspaces.

- Conduct technical rehearsals with the minimal number of students possible and adhere to social distancing for both performers and technicians throughout.
- Err on the side of caution—if a student says they do not feel well, send them home and follow district procedures regarding contact tracing and follow up procedures.



Live Performance

Onstage, live theatrical performance can remain a central part of your school theatre program, as long as it can be produced safely with students working in all capacities—onstage, backstage, and front of house—and such that parents, other students and staff, and the community at large can enjoy these performances with minimum risk and concern.

For safety and opportunity, along with in-person performances before an audience, consider these three options regarding live student theatrical performance:

1. Virtual performance models that rely on video conferencing applications.
2. Outdoor performances, where social distancing would be easier.
3. In-person onstage performances simultaneously streamed live to an online audience.

Also consider scheduling additional performances over a longer period to allow for more community members to attend and to make up for lost revenues due to lower individual attendance, or develop a partner arrangement with another school or community-professional theatre with a larger seating capacity.

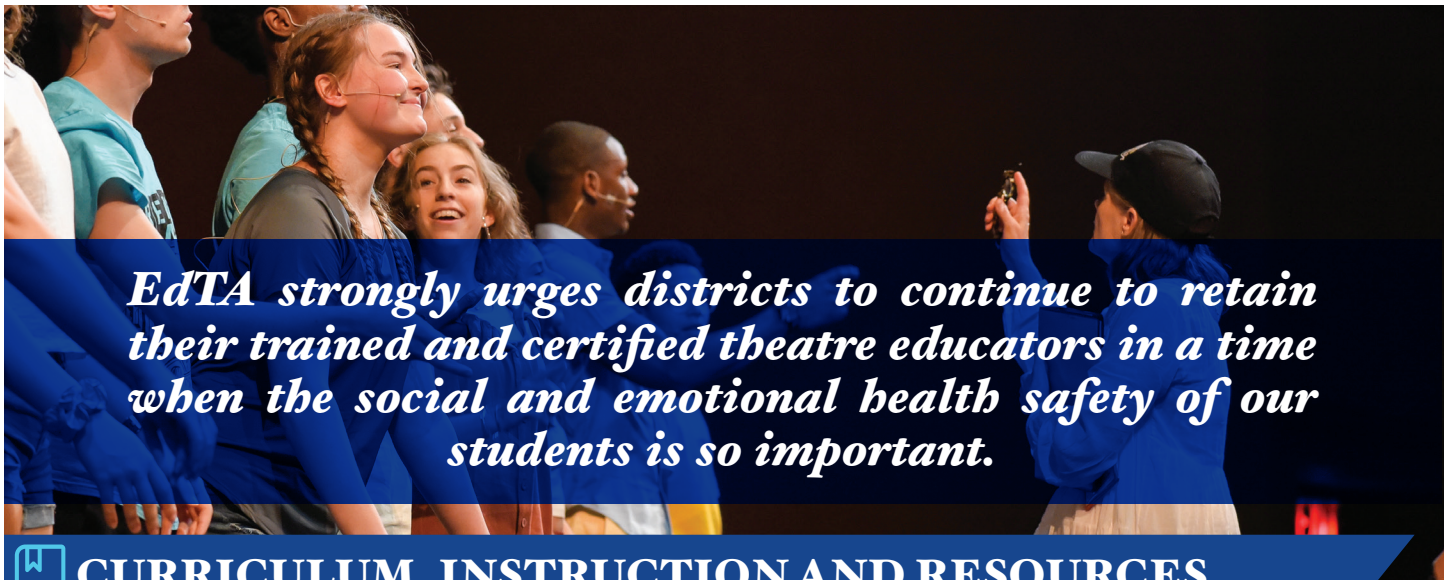
- Whenever possible, students, staff, and volunteers should wear masks when backstage, in the green room or other theatre related spaces, and adhere to the CDC guidelines for handling and sanitizing the masks.
- Calculate acceptable audience attendance based on house capacity that ensures 6-foot social distancing (<https://www.banquettablespro.com/social-distancing-room-space-calculator>).
- Follow district guidelines regarding seating.
- Educate audience members on health rules and expectations through:
 - school or program website;
 - social media channels;
 - online ticket purchasing;
 - emails and push notifications;
 - signage leading to and at the event site.
- Require volunteers—parents, ushers, box office staff, etc.—to follow the same safety guidelines as all other school personnel.
- Require all patrons to:
 - undergo temperature checks before entering the theatre;
 - wear masks throughout the performances;
 - follow a pre-marked pathway of entrance in and out of the theatre.
- Provide hand sanitizer in the lobby and restrooms.
- Sanitize all public areas prior to and after a performance—seats, rails, restrooms, back of house, and other high-touch surfaces, using CDC-approved disinfectants.
- Sanitize all set pieces and props before and after the performances.
- Advise audience members to limit clustering in groups before the production begins, during intermission, and afterwards.

- Limit bathroom occupancy to a designated number by applying the room capacity calculator (<https://www.banquettablespro.com/social-distancing-room-space-calculator>).
- Limit concession stand sales to pre-packaged beverages and food or eliminate concessions completely.
- Backstage:
 - masks should be worn at all times by all students, teachers, and volunteers in the backstage area;
 - sanitize all technical hardware--microphones/headsets, sound and light boards, lights, and rigging before and after the performance or rehearsals, per manufacturer instruction;
 - Sanitize all surfaces in the control booth, using CDC-approved disinfectants;
 - Limit the number of students in the control booth, based on social distancing rules.
- Be prepared to assist in contact tracing, per district health guidelines.



Virtual performance

Virtual theatre is something new and unexpected for everyone—including educational theatre. Given that newness, a lot of experimentation is going on to figure how to best create meaningful stories that work for actors, playwrights, audience members, and everyone else involved in making this magic happen. As a theatre educator that includes you as well. As noted earlier, the internet has exploded with live, recorded, and repurposed theatre in the months since the pandemic disrupted the theatre world and everyone’s daily lives. EdTA is tracking these new resources and is updating them on a regular basis. EdTA’s Theatre Educator Pro offers a curated list of resources and guidance to help you get started: <https://learn.schooltheatre.org/creating-virtual-performances>.



CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION AND RESOURCES

At this writing, it is unclear what model of education delivery will be followed by individual states and districts. *How* you deliver theatre instruction may change under the new education normal, but learning outcomes should remain the same, based on a well-organized standards-based curriculum featuring curricular classes in general theatre and a range of specialized classes that address the four artistic processes of Creating, Performing, Responding, and Connecting.



Curriculum

As with performance, the internet has been flooded with innovative new approaches to theatre instruction that imagine teaching students in the multiple models suggested above. EdTA urges you to explore this content, particularly on websites that provide curated lists of lessons and resources. Start by reviewing [Theatre Educator Pro’s online learning center](#) and its [Resources for Creating Online Learning](#) and [Click to Teach: Lessons for Online Learning](#) pages.

The following is fundamental curriculum guidance relevant to the different models of teaching that you might work under in the 2020-21 school year and perhaps beyond:

1. When in-person theatre performance is either limited or unavailable, the curriculum should include curated teacher-guided virtual or recorded theatre performances that are or will be widely available so students can gain a better understanding of play structure, playwright intent, and production elements.
2. Curriculum and scheduling must be mindful of how instruction can support the social and emotional wellbeing of students, whether through playmaking, classroom instruction, or virtual environments in the COVID-19 era.
3. Virtual or hybrid curriculum should re-imagine in-class lessons, whenever possible, and create visible evidence of student learning that is measurable.
4. For students with special needs, adaptation tools must be provided to maximize their participation in classroom and production activities, either virtually or in-person.
5. The size of in-person theatre classes should meet CDC and state or district public health guidelines.
6. Coursework must continue to educate students on the elements and importance of intellectual property, copyright, and licensing fees, especially as there is an increased interest and demand for streaming of theatre performances. (For guidance on using licensed plays for virtual instruction or performances go to: <https://help.concordtheatricals.co,m/section/virtual-performances-and-digital-rights>)
7. Regular and meaningful opportunities for students to rehearse, produce, and perform theatre is of paramount importance, whether in person or remotely.



Instruction

EdTA strongly urges districts to continue to retain their trained and certified theatre educators in a time when the social and emotional health safety of our students is so important. Theatre educators can help, not only in how they teach, but in how they conduct themselves, with students, peers, and parents. Modeling the CDC and district guidelines regarding the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) will send a strong message that they care about the wellbeing of the school community and the world. Working in this new educational environment you should:

1. be allowed to teach within your discipline as a theatre educator who possesses specialized training and pedagogy;
2. be provided specialized support for special-education students in theatre if they are provided for these students in other classes, whether in-person or virtually;
3. have opportunities to engage in professional development that is specifically designed to meet a redefined pedagogy of teaching in multiple environments;
4. have access to virtual or in-person theatre teacher work groups/ professional learning communities;
5. be evaluated in a way consistent with that of teachers in other subject areas, mindful of the new teaching norms educators were thrust into without notice or training.



Resources

Literary

1. Theatre is included in the district's schedule of textbook/resource adoption and updates for purchasing specialized resources, particularly those that meet virtual teaching needs.
2. Print textbooks should be made available to students without digital access.
3. If possible, textbooks should remain at home and not be transported to and from school.

Technology

1. Teachers and students should have reliable broadband content and daily access to a computer, tablet or smartphone, no matter the model by which you are delivering instruction.
2. Teachers and students should have access to the software and hardware needed to create virtual performances.

Production Elements

1. Set, lighting, sound, props, costume and makeup resources, theatre software, hardware, and tools are available to support theatre production, both in person and virtually.
2. All production equipment is regularly inspected, maintained, and regularly sanitized based on CDC and district health agency guidelines and manufacturers specifications.

Facilities

1. Theatre dedicated spaces (auditoriums, black boxes, dressing rooms, etc.) should remain reserved for theatre instruction and classes.
2. Access is available to a regularly sanitized classroom space dedicated to theatre instruction and adequate in size to accommodate students safely as prescribed by the CDC and state or district health agency guidelines for social distancing, whether for performance, rehearsals, or classroom instruction.
3. Theatre production and performance space is available to accommodate actors and technicians.
4. An HVAC system that has been inspected and certified as meeting CDC and guidelines by state or district licensed technician contracted by the school and district.
5. One trained person should be designated to monitor all shop tool/equipment use and its sanitization.



All schools must clarify how they will meet the most up-to-date CDC guidelines and guidance issued by the state and district public health agencies prior to reopening. This recommendation guide aligns with the agency's document [CDC Activities and Initiatives Supporting the COVID-19 Response and the President's Plan for Opening America Up Again](#), issued in May 2020.

The CDC states that schools should:

- follow applicable state and local orders for reopening;
- conduct temperature checks of all students and personnel entering the school;

- prepare to protect children and employees at higher risk for severe illness;
- screen students and employees upon arrival for symptoms and history of exposure;
- promote hand washing and the wearing of masks by all students and employees;
- create a plan to intensify cleaning, disinfection, and ventilation throughout the school;
- encourage social distancing through increased spacing, small groups and limited mixing between groups;
- train all employees on health and safety protocols;
- engage in ongoing monitoring of students and staff;
- develop and implement procedures to check for signs and symptoms of students and employees daily upon arrival;
- encourage anyone who is sick to stay home;
- communicate and monitor developments with local authorities, employees, and families regarding cases, exposures, and updates to policies and procedures;
- monitor student and employee absences and have flexible leave policies and practices;
- consult with the local health authorities if there are cases in the facility or an increase in cases in the local area.

For additional schoolwide reopening guidance, see the General Guides and Resources list below.

This guide is by no means comprehensive or final; EdTA will update periodically, as needed. If you have suggestions or updates regarding how your theatre program is reopening, please email jpalmarini@schooltheatre.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Educational Theatre Association is grateful for the guidance that other organizations' reopening documents provided in the creation of this document:

- CDC Activities and Initiatives Supporting the COVID-19 Response
- Texas Thesians Recommendations for Reopening Theatre Classrooms & Theatre Facilities
- San Francisco Gay Men's Choral Singing in the Time of COVID-19
- Event Safety Guide for Event Professionals During the COVID-19 Pandemic
- Return to School Roadmap: Where Public Education and Public Health Meet
- National Federation of State High Schools Associations' Guidance for Opening High School Athletics and Activities

GENERAL GUIDES AND RESOURCES

- [CDC Activities and Initiatives Supporting the COVID-19 Response and the President's Plan for Opening Up America Again](#)
- [K-12 Schools and Child Care Programs: FAQs for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents](#)
- [Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic School Decision Tree](#)
- [CDC Recommendation Regarding the Use of Cloth Face Coverings, Especially in Areas of Significant Community Based Transmission](#)

- [Return to School Roadmap](#)
- [American Federation of Teachers Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities](https://www.aft.org/reopen-schools)
<https://www.aft.org/reopen-schools>
- [Council of Chief State School Officers: Phase 2 Restart and Recovery COVID-19 Response](#)
- [Educause May 15th blog: “COVID-19 Quick Poll Results: Fall Planning for Education and Student Support”, by Susan Grajek](#)



PERFORMANCE-BASED GUIDES AND RESOURCES

- [San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus: Choral Singing in the Time of COVID-19, by Dr. Timothy Selig](#)
- [Arts Together: Planning and Guidance in Maryland Public Schools](#)
- [Performing Arts Industry Relaunch Project](#)
- [Theatre Educator Pro](#)
- [The Event Safety Alliance Reopening Guide, edited by Steven A. Adelman](#)
- [Roadmap for Recovery and Resilience for Theater](#)
- [National Federation of State High School Associations Guide for Opening up High School Athletics and Activities](#)
- [“Arts Education Is Essential”: May 2020 statement of support by 69 national arts and arts education organizations](#)
- [Arts Education and Social-Emotional Learning Outcomes Among K-12 Students: Developing a Theory of Action](#)
- [2016 EdTA Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Theatre Education](#)