

MODIFYING SCHOOL SPACES DURING MEALTIMES

to Reduce Spread of COVID-19

As a K-12 school administrator, you can work with teachers, building managers, school nutrition staff, and custodians to modify mealtime school spaces to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19. This tool can help you modify mealtime spaces to apply mitigation measures listed in [Operating Schools during COVID-19: CDC's Considerations](#). Examples are provided for eating meals in the cafeteria, classroom, and outdoor areas; however, you can apply the strategies in this document to other spaces, such as the gymnasium or auditorium.

In addition to modifying the physical space, modify procedures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission during meal service, such as ensuring proper [handwashing or use of hand sanitizer](#) before and after eating, [staggering mealtimes for class cohorts](#), and expanding [disinfection or sanitization practices](#) to include makeshift food surfaces (such as desks) between each use. For more complete guidance on school meal distribution procedures, see [Safely Distributing School Meals during COVID-19](#).

7 Ways You Can Make School Spaces Safer for Mealtimes

1. Masks

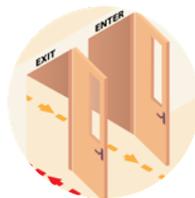
- **Provide a safe way for students to store their masks while eating.** Inexpensive and breathable containers, such as paper bags, can be provided for students.



- **Ensure students remove and replace their masks properly before and after mealtimes.** See additional guidance [mask use](#).

2. Physical distancing

- **Mark different doors for entering and exiting.** If your mealtime space has more than one door, designate one to be the entrance and one to be the exit. Clearly label them with signs or tape so that walking patterns are in one direction through the doors. If you only have one door, have a plan for students to take turns and mark waiting lines as necessary. Exterior doors that open to the outdoors should also be designated and labeled as entrances or exits; however, if there is an emergency, policies to exit the nearest door should remain in place. Ensure that doors have signage with instructions to wear a mask, stay 6 feet apart, and [wash hands](#).



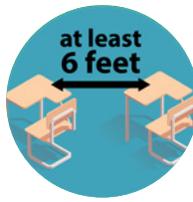
- **Mark walking paths.** Designate walking paths or provide physical guides on floors and signs on walls to ensure students remain at least 6 feet apart. Clearly label directional routes throughout the mealtime space and in the hallways to and from the space. Consider making these paths one way for students when entering and exiting the room, ensuring accessibility for students and staff with disabilities. For outdoor spaces, you can use marking paint on grass and paved surfaces.



- **Designate a delivery path for teachers and staff delivering lunches to other mealtime spaces so students can avoid the use of serving lines or mark waiting spots in the serving lines that are at least 6 feet apart.** Schools should consider methods of food delivery to students during mealtimes whenever possible. A one-way walking path should be designated for nutrition staff who will be delivering food to students. However, when food delivery is not possible, students should keep a physical distance of at least 6 feet when waiting in meal serving lines. Tape lines on the cafeteria floor or use marking paint on the grass or pavement when outdoors to show students where to stand to maintain an appropriate distance from one another.



- **Arrange seating so that students sit at least 6 feet apart.** Students may be kept at least 6 feet apart from one another in a variety of seating arrangements. For the classroom, space desks, tables, and chairs so that students sit at least 6 feet apart and have students eat at their own desks or assigned space. For outdoor areas, place benches, tables, or blankets where students may eat at least 6 feet apart.



- **Mark tables, desks, and chairs so that students sit at least 6 feet apart.** You can use colorful tape to mark tables where you want students to sit, or tape marks on the floor to indicate where they must keep their desk or chair. You can also tape “X” on seats that cannot be removed where students should not sit.

- **Designate a pathway and location for placement of used trays, cutlery, and other reusable items.** When setting up spaces for mealtimes in the classroom or other areas, designate a spot where students do not risk touching used, unclean items. For example, designate a table or cart to place used cutlery. Instruct students not to touch others’ used, unclean items. Mark the floor around the designated return area so that students stay at least 6 feet apart from one another or apply other procedures to limit crowding. Instruct students not to share trays, eating utensils and other mealtime items. Ensure reusable items are washed with dishwashing soap and hot water or placed in a dishwasher.



3. Hand hygiene

- **Wash hands with soap and water before and after eating or utilize a hand sanitizing station.** Staff and students should wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after eating. Build time into daily routines for students and staff to wash hands before and after mealtimes. If hand washing is not feasible, use hand sanitizer. Make a hand sanitizing station available for use near each door, as well. Make sure the sanitizer contains at least 60% alcohol and that the dispenser is at a height where it can be reached by students. Supervise younger children who may not use enough sanitizer or may use it improperly. Also, to ensure that there is no crowding at the hand-sanitizing station, use tape to mark spots on the floor, so students know where to stand to remain at least 6 feet apart.



- **Place touch-free trash cans in all mealtime areas and keep large garbage bags on hand to collect mealtime trash.** Most cafeterias already have large touch-free trash cans where students can put their meal waste after eating. These should also be provided for classrooms and other spaces used for mealtimes. For the classroom, trash cans can be open (stationary or on rollers) or have foot presses that open a lid. Alternatively, supervising staff can collect garbage with a rolling bin or large trash bag. Persons collecting garbage after mealtimes should wear a mask and gloves, remain at least 6 feet away from others, and avoid touching trash as feasible.



4. Cleaning and disinfection

- **Keep a stock of cleaning supplies to wipe down food surfaces (tables and desks) before and after mealtimes.** Although cafeteria tables are typically cleaned, procedures may not be in place to clean desks or outdoor tables. Because desks and outdoor tables may become food contact surfaces when alternate spaces are used for mealtimes, school staff should remember to clean these before and after meals. For any surface used for eating that requires disinfection, use [EPA-approved disinfectants](#) labeled as “food contact” surface disinfectants and ensure that disinfection products are not used near children. Make certain that cleaning products are used correctly and that no residue is left on table surfaces. Ensure safe storage (e.g., locked cabinet) of all cleaning and disinfecting products. Some disinfectants may trigger an asthma attack. To protect people with asthma, follow recommendations to reduce the chance of an asthma attack while disinfecting.



5. Ventilation

- **Ensure your ventilation system functions optimally.** Make modifications to your heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) system or procedures to increase airflow and improve indoor air quality. Seek consultation from qualified HVAC professionals when considering modifications to HVAC systems. Modifications might include disabling demand-controlled ventilation switches that reduce air supply based on occupancy or temperature during occupied hours, opening minimum outdoor air dampers to reduce or eliminate HVAC air recirculation, and running the HVAC system at maximum outside airflow for two hours before and after school. For a more detailed list of ways to ensure optimal [ventilation](#) of your school, see [Operating Schools during COVID-19: CDC’s Considerations](#).

- **Bring as much fresh air into the room as possible.** When weather conditions allow and it's safe to do so, **open doors and windows** as much as you can to bring in fresh, outdoor air. While it's better to open them wide, even having a window cracked open slightly can help. If you can, open **multiple** doors and windows to allow more fresh air to move inside. Do not open windows and doors if doing so is unsafe for you or others (for example, presence of young children and pets, risk of falling, triggering asthma symptoms, high levels of outdoor pollution, poor weather conditions). **Use child-safe fans to increase airflow.** Place a fan securely, carefully, and as close as possible to an open window blowing outside. This helps get rid of virus particles in your room by blowing air outside. Even without an open window, fans can improve air flow. Point fans away from people. Pointing fans toward people can possibly cause contaminated air to flow directly at them or travel further into the room. Use ceiling fans to help improve air flow in the room whether or not windows are open.



- **Provide canopies, awnings, or umbrellas to shield students and staff from sun or rain (if students are eating outdoors).** Providing some covered spaces outdoors will help protect students and staff from certain weather conditions. These coverings can be installed permanently or assembled and removed as necessary. They can be placed over tables and benches or over a kiosk or table that is used for distributing meals. Make sure coverings still allow air to circulate freely; avoid adding walls to canopies, tents, and other coverings to maximize air circulation.



- **Arrange mealtime seating to minimize sitting in direct pathway of respiratory droplets.** In the cafeteria and in classrooms, you can arrange students to sit facing the same direction. If this is not feasible, you can stagger students down each side of the table so that they are not directly facing one another but remain 6 feet apart. You may need to move tables and remove chairs to space students at a proper distance.

6. Physical barriers

- **Install physical barriers (e.g., plexiglass).** Installing barriers may provide some protection to students. Plexiglass partitions, tri-fold shields that sit on desks or tables, and free-standing structures (like foldable, vertical mats) placed between tables or desks are examples of items that can function as barriers between students during mealtimes.



- **Install physical barriers (e.g., plexiglass) between school nutrition staff and students (e.g., serving lines, payment lines).** While food delivery to other mealtime spaces is preferred, physical barriers between school nutrition staff and students are recommended if students must pick up their own meals from the cafeteria and 6 feet of distance can't be maintained. A physical barrier can help protect the staff and those they serve when close contact is required. A small space can be left open at the bottom of the barrier so that meals or money can be safely passed through.



7. Promotional materials and safety

- **Post signs that promote everyday protective measures and describe how to stop the spread of germs.** Signs can inform students of proper handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue, and wearing a mask to cover their mouth and nose. CDC has several child-friendly [posters](#) that can be used.

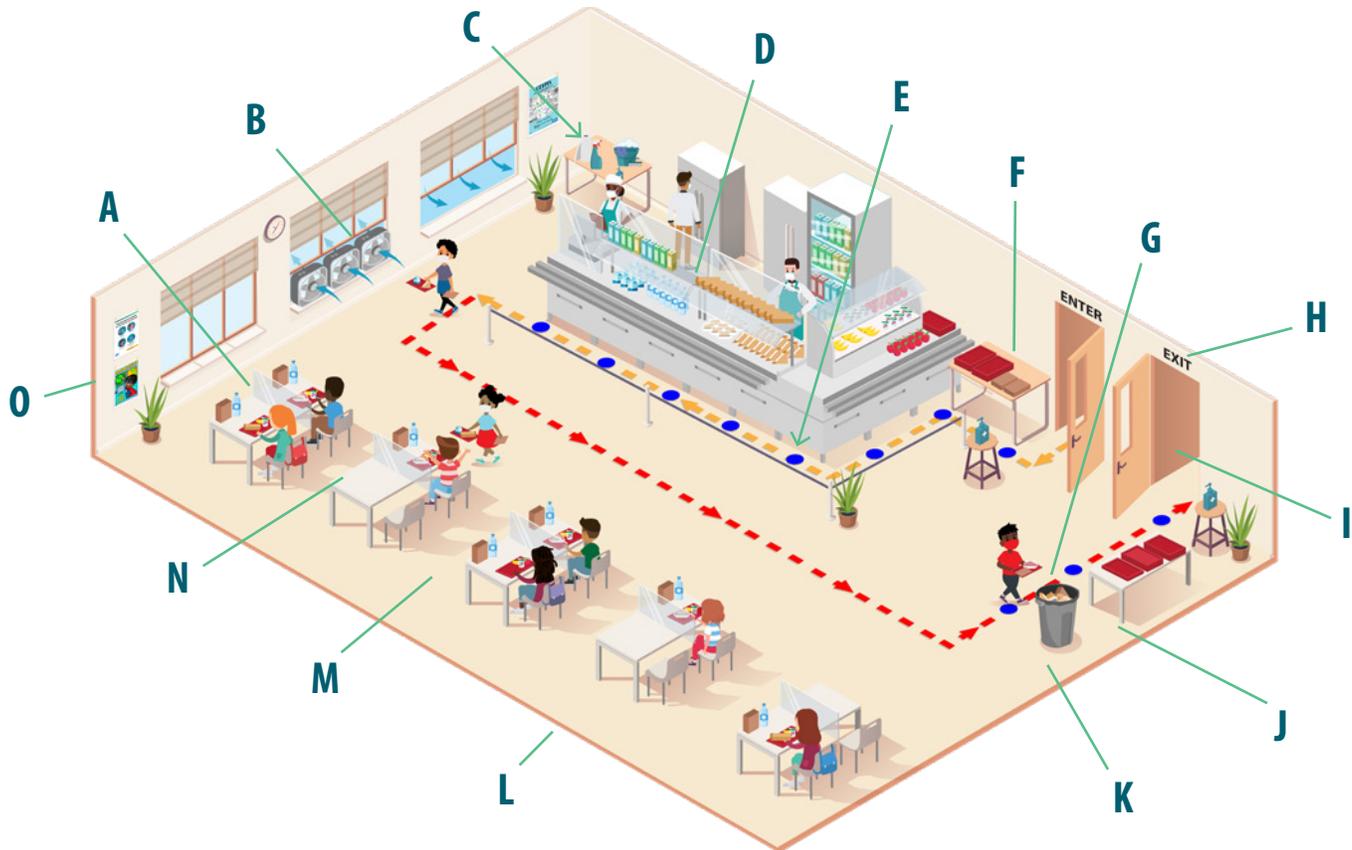


5 Sample Layouts for School Spaces

The graphics below depict sample layouts showing examples of how to apply the recommended mealtime modifications in various settings—two for cafeterias, one for classrooms, and two for outdoor spaces. Use these for ideas to accommodate prevention strategies to slow the spread of COVID-19 during mealtimes.

Figure 1

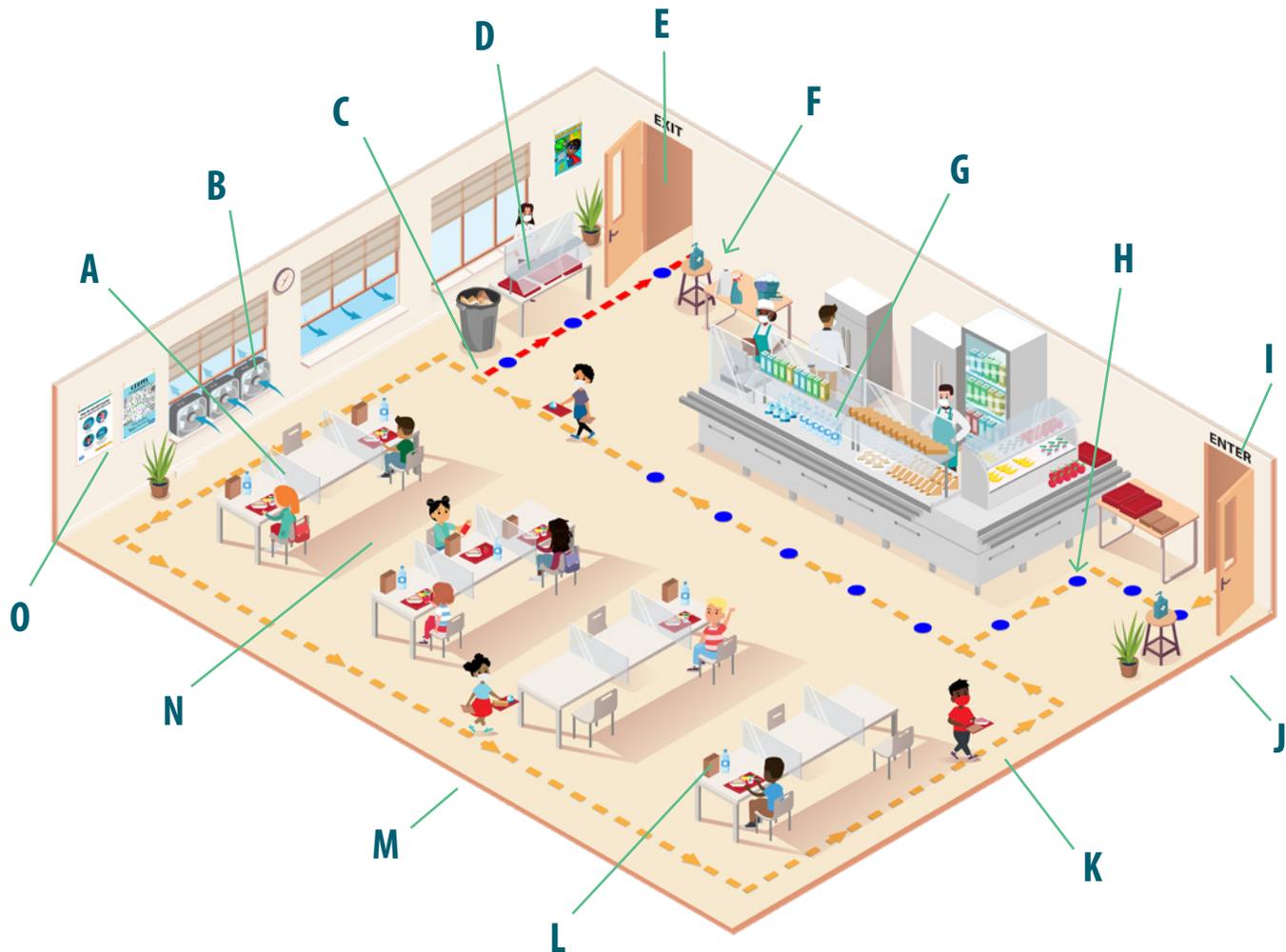
This diagram illustrates how to set up a cafeteria to minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19. In this example, the tables are 8 feet long and students are sitting less than 6 feet apart on one side of the table facing in the same direction. Since students cannot sit at least 6 feet apart, plexiglass is installed between students.



- A.** Install physical barriers when it is difficult to maintain 6 feet of physical distance.
- B.** Place a fan as close as possible to an open window blowing outside. Keep a stock of cleaning products and use them to wipe food surfaces before and after mealtimes.
- C.** Keep a stock of cleaning products and use them to wipe food surfaces before and after mealtimes.
- D.** Install physical barriers between school nutrition staff and students in the serving and payment lines.
- E.** Mark spots that are at least 6 feet apart for waiting in food service lines.
- F.** Place a hand sanitizing station near each door.
- G.** Mark one-way walking paths with tape on the floor.
- H.** Mark one door to enter and one to exit.
- I.** Open doors and windows as much as you can to bring in fresh, outdoor air.
- J.** Designate a location for students to return reusable items (e.g., meal trays).
- K.** Place touch-free trash cans near the exit.
- L.** Ensure your ventilation system functions optimally.
- M.** Arrange and mark seats and tables so that students are at least 6 feet apart.
- N.** Place masks in a paper bag while students are eating.
- O.** Post signs that promote everyday protective measures.

Figure 2

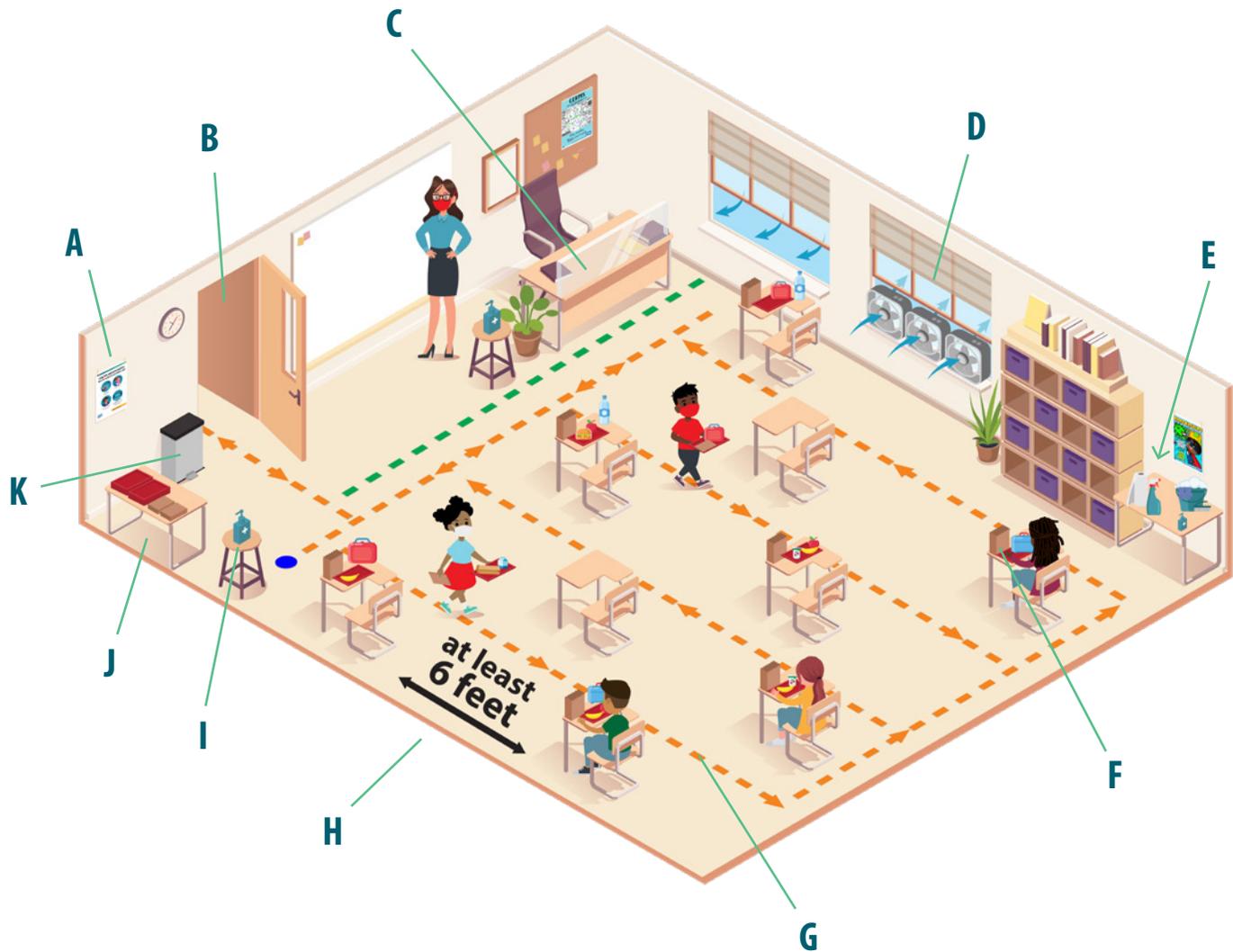
This diagram illustrates how to set up a cafeteria to slow the spread of COVID-19. In this example, the tables are 12 feet long and students who are sitting on the same side of the table are at least 6 feet apart. Students sitting on the opposite side of the table are staggered so that they do not directly face students on the other side. Plexiglass has been installed between students for additional protection.



- A.** Install physical barriers when it is difficult to maintain 6 feet of physical distance.
- B.** Place a fan as close as possible to an open window blowing outside.
- C.** Place touch-free trash cans near the exit.
- D.** Designate a location for students to return reusable items (e.g., meal trays).
- E.** Open doors and windows as much as you can to bring in fresh, outdoor air.
- F.** Keep a stock of cleaning products and use them to wipe food surfaces before and after mealtimes.
- G.** Install physical barriers between school nutrition staff and students in the serving and payment lines.
- H.** Mark spots that are at least 6 feet apart for waiting in food service lines.
- I.** Mark one door to enter and one to exit.
- J.** Place a hand sanitizing station near each door.
- K.** Mark one-way walking paths with tape on the floor.
- L.** Place masks in a paper bag while students are eating.
- M.** Ensure your ventilation system functions optimally.
- N.** Arrange and mark seats and tables so that students are at least 6 feet apart.
- O.** Post signs that promote everyday protective measures.

Figure 3

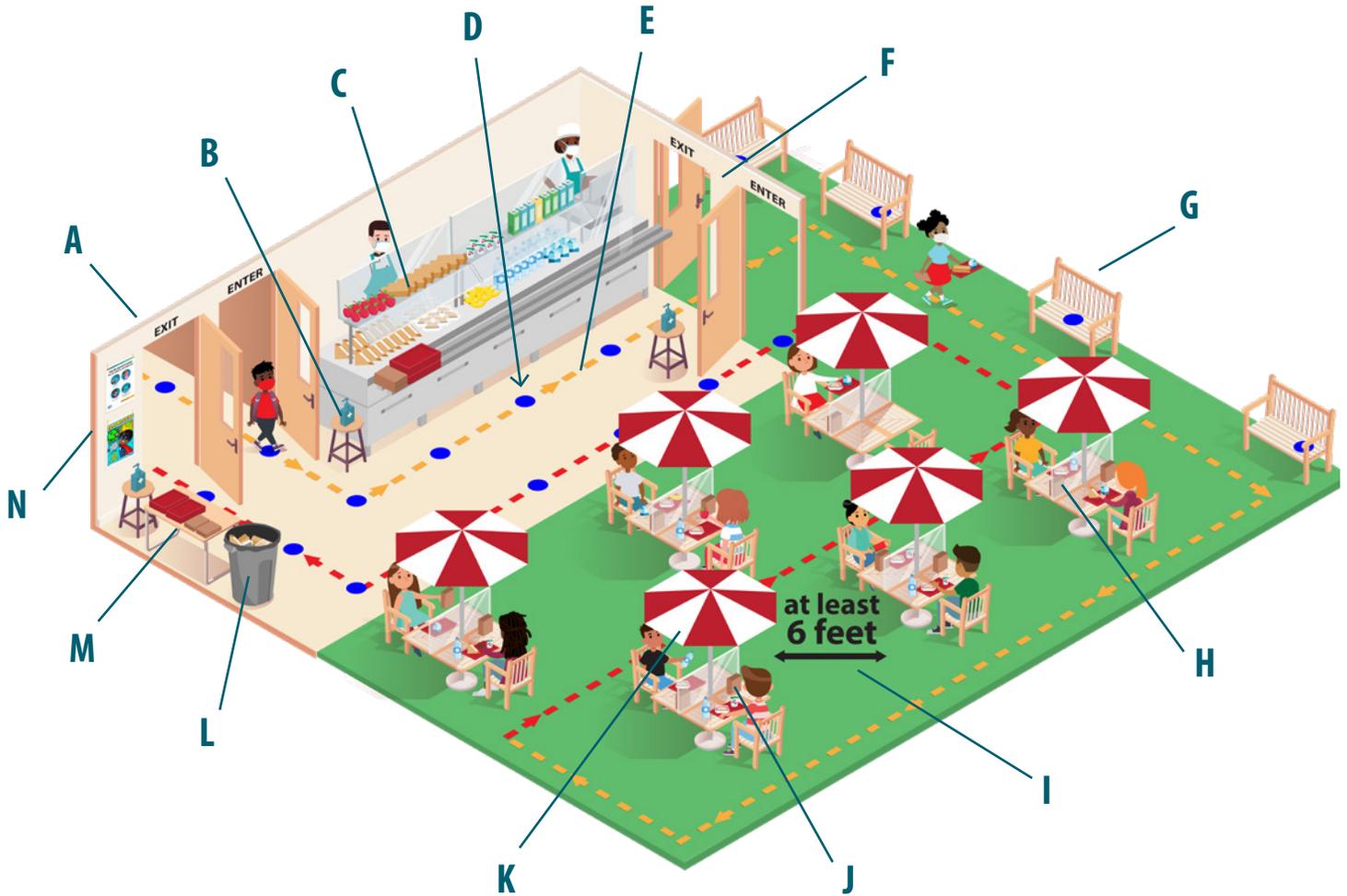
This diagram illustrates how to set up a classroom during mealtime to slow the spread of COVID-19. Only one example of a school classroom is provided here, but this is not the only way a classroom can be set up. For other examples, see [CDC's How Do I Set Up My Classroom guide](#).



- A.** Post signs that promote everyday protective measures.
- B.** Open doors and windows as much as you can to bring in fresh, outdoor air.
- C.** Install physical barriers when it is difficult to maintain 6 feet of physical distance.
- D.** Place a fan as close as possible to an open window blowing outside.
- E.** Keep a stock of cleaning products and use them to wipe food surfaces before and after mealtimes.
- F.** Place masks in a paper bag while students are eating.
- G.** Mark one-way walking paths with tape on the floor.
- H.** Arrange and mark seats and tables so that student are at least 6 feet apart.
- I.** Place a hand sanitizing station near each door.
- J.** Designate a location for students to return reusable items (e.g., meal trays).
- K.** Place touch-free trash cans near the exit.

Figure 4

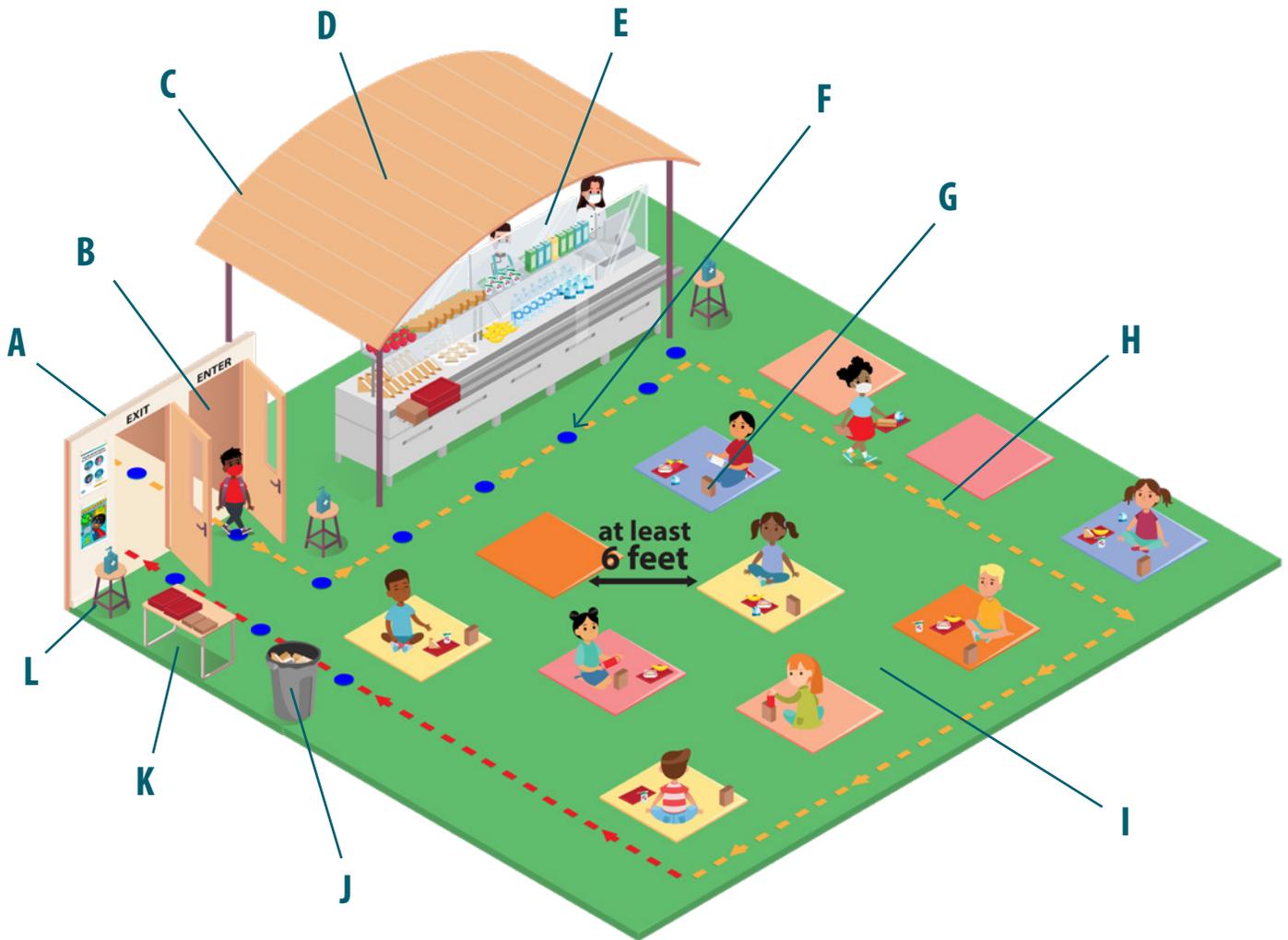
This diagram illustrates how to set up an outdoor area to slow the spread of COVID-19. In this example, students are shown as picking up their own meals from the cafeteria and taking them outside. Tables covered by umbrellas are spaced at least 6 feet apart, but plexiglass is placed between students sharing a table for additional protection. Benches are marked so that students sit at least 6 feet apart.



- A.** Mark one door to enter and one to exit.
- B.** Place a hand sanitizing station near each door.
- C.** Install physical barriers between school nutrition staff and students in the serving and payment lines.
- D.** Mark spots that are at least 6 feet apart for waiting in food service lines.
- E.** Mark one-way walking paths with tape on the floor.
- F.** Open doors and windows as much as you can to bring in fresh, outdoor air.
- G.** Arrange and mark benches so that student are at least 6 feet apart.
- H.** Install physical barriers when it is difficult to maintain 6 feet of physical distance.
- I.** Arrange and mark tables so that they are at least 6 feet apart.
- J.** Place masks in a designated spot on the table while students are eating.
- K.** Place umbrellas or canopies over tables.
- L.** Place touch-free trash cans near the exit.
- M.** Designate a location for students to return reusable items (e.g., meal trays).
- N.** Post signs that promote everyday protective measures.

Figure 5

This diagram illustrates how to set up an outdoor area to slow the spread COVID-19. In this example, a serving area is set up outdoors where students can pick up their school meals. Blankets are placed on the ground so that students are spaced at least 6 feet apart while eating with a small group or cohort.



- A.** Mark one door to enter and one to exit.
- B.** Open doors and windows as much as you can to bring in fresh, outdoor air.
- C.** Establish an outdoor services line for food distribution.
- D.** Place a canopy over the serving line.
- E.** Install physical barriers between school nutrition staff and students in the serving and payment lines.
- F.** Mark spots that are at least 6 feet apart for waiting in food service lines.
- G.** Place masks in a paper bag while students are eating.
- H.** Mark paths on the ground so that students know where to walk.
- I.** Arrange blankets and mats so that students are at least 6 feet apart.
- J.** Place touch-free trash cans near the exit.
- K.** Designate a location for students to return reusable items (e.g., meal trays).
- L.** Place a hand sanitizing station near each door.