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CITY-COWLEY COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT



City-Cowley County
Health Department

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Opening Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic

History:

The Novel Wuhan Coronavirus 2019* officially appeared in Kansas in March of 2020. The virus was renamed and is now known as SARS-CoV-2 and referred to commonly as COVID-19. In Cowley County the first confirmed case was recorded on April 1, 2020. Congregate gatherings including schools were suspended in March of 2020 and the 2019-2020 school year was interrupted with widespread cancellation of classes and activities. The disruption of activities did not only affect schools but widely impacted all of Cowley County as business, industry and daily life was severely impacted by stay at home and isolation orders.

COVID-19 is a respiratory disease caused by a coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) which spreads primarily through droplets generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes, or through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose. Studies show that asymptomatic people and people in the pre-symptomatic phase (2-3 days before symptoms begin) can also be a source of infection.

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever and lower respiratory symptoms including coughing, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing. However, there are many other symptoms that may be associated with COVID-19 including chills, fatigue, muscle aches or body aches headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, and diarrhea. The elderly and people with underlying medical problems such as high blood pressure, heart problems or diabetes, or chronic respiratory conditions, are at a greater risk of serious illness from COVID-19.

Schools are an important part of the infrastructure of communities, as they provide safe, supportive learning environments for students, employ teachers and other staff, and enable parents, guardians, and caregivers to work. The unique and critical role that schools play makes them a priority for opening and remaining open, enabling students to receive both academic instruction and support as well as critical services.

Pandemic Response:

In March 2020 our pandemic response was based in the unknown. Public Health had no real data about the epidemiology of COVID-19. Faced with a virus that was new with no known antivirals or vaccines to combat its spread methodologies used in the early 20th Century were employed in the current environment. Identification through observation and testing, Isolation and quarantine for the ill, Recovery from the illness and Return to normal activity is the norm for responding to viral

contagion and will remain the standard until such time that effective prophylaxis can be provided to the population so as to create herd immunity factors that render COVID-19 a non-threat.

Sadly, that time has not yet arrived, and we must function in a manner that will allow us to continue with daily life while employing every preventative measure we can to avoid widespread disruption of our organizations and institutions specifically learning in school settings. It is a concession that COVID-19 will affect the 2020-21 academic year. It is believed that it is not a question of “IF” but rather of “WHEN” it affects a student, teacher, staff member and ultimately impacts a school and district.

This guidance from the local public health officer along with careful and thoughtful planning by the school districts in Cowley County will hopefully lessen the anxiety and reduce the fear of contracting the illness. Together following plans specific to your districts, we will be able to convene and conduct classroom learning in a successful fashion.

Epidemiological Data:

In Cowley County we are aggressively testing symptomatic people for the presence of the COVID-19 virus. As of the date of this document we are nearing having completed 3000 tests through which we have identified more than 160 infected people.

The demographics of the test data indicate that the greatest rates of infection are found in adults over age 21. We see the highest concentration of cases in working adults age 30-50. We know that our elder population has been well protected to date as our number of confirmed illnesses in the 60+ year age group is the lowest of all adult groups. The least affected population group in our county to date has been our children aged 0-10, the second lowest infection rates have occurred in the 11-20 age group. However, it should be noted that the older the person the more likely they are to contract the virus due to increased social interaction and the propensity to take risks and not employ virus protection methodologies (mask, social distancing, hygiene etc.).

Throughout our response efforts the Health Department has compiled the data about illness in Cowley County and has closely monitored the individuals that have contracted COVID-19. What the data reveals when analyzed is promising.

We have learned thus far that our elementary aged children appear to be the least likely to contract the illness. The only cases we have seen in the County in this age group have been ones in which the parent or another adult in the household became ill and spread the illness to other family members by close person to person contact.

In our middle school age group, we see a very similar pattern. However, we have seen evidence of exposures in this group that are connected to social contact; such as going to a friend's house where a person there was ill or playing a team sport and being exposed to the virus. Thus far case like this are very rare; however, they illustrate how social activity and viral spread are interrelated. Middle schoolers still rely heavily upon transportation from parents or older siblings, so they are at greater risk for exposure, fortunately, we still have seen only a few cases in this demographic group.

The senior high school age group will be the students at greatest risk for contracting the virus. While they are in the group that generally will recover quickly with few long-lasting side effects, they also tend to be the greatest risk takers in the school aged demographic. We have noted cases in the 17 – 18-year-old age group where the child becomes ill and is the only family member to be ill. This characteristic mimics adult infections more than children that we have tracked during our response. Mobility (personal transportation) active social lives, friends, dating, athletics, theater, school sponsored clubs and extra curriculums increase the likelihood of exposure. Hopefully this group will also realize that they are not bulletproof and will closely follow public health guidance to limit exposure during this school year so they will not experience cancellation of games, dances, theater events and club meetings.

Personal Health Protections:

All students will greatly benefit by closely adhering to the already published guidance from public health officials. Maintaining appropriate social distance, properly using a face covering or mask, performing frequent handwashing (between classes and always before eating), limiting hand to face actions, covering any cough or sneeze, and most importantly NOT COMING TO SCHOOL IF YOU ARE ILL. Additionally, all students must maintain good nutrition and should drink plenty of water each day to maintain hydration. Physical exercise is highly encouraged and getting a full 8-10 hours of sleep at night to allow the body the needed rest is extremely important.

Tobacco use, smoking, vaping, the consumption of drugs or alcohol are never a good idea and will certainly increase your chance of infection for any viral illness.

Cloth face coverings should be laundered often, in the same fashion that you would not wear the same socks or undergarments repeatedly the face coverings should be maintained daily.

If you feel ill at school report this immediately to a faculty member and most importantly the school nurse if available.

Student Transportation:

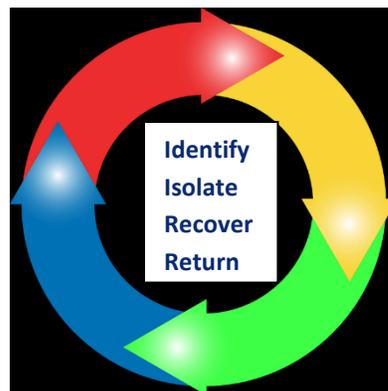
Students that rely upon school busses for transportation should maintain as much separation from others while on the bus and wear their face mask for the entirety of the trip.

Students that rideshare or car pool should be aware that the largest outbreak of COVID-19 in Cowley County began because one person that was ill rode in a carpool and spread the virus to three others who in turn spread the virus to 15 more and resulted in more than 50 confirmed cases in a three week time period. An outbreak in a school of that magnitude would greatly impair all activities.

Follow closely the transportation plan outlined by your district the have been designed with student health and safety as the major objective.

Family Illness Onset During the School Term:

This is likely the most important section for students and parents to understand. How will individuals that become ill be treated and what will happen? Public Health is employing the Identify – Isolate – Recover – Return, (IIRR) methodology.



We have learned as previously noted that COVID-19 is spread through close person to person contact. Additionally; we have noted that the most effective way to treat this virus is to first identify individuals that show symptoms of the virus and to isolate them from the population. Allow the ill person(s) time to fully recover while isolated and then have them return to full activity.

This methodology has been successful in allowing more than 99% of the people who become ill to fully recover. However, this can only occur when we treat an entire family as one unit. What this means is that if one person in a family becomes ill, the entire family must isolate and recover fully from the illness. This is the only way we can eliminate the possibility that a single family member does not interact socially and spread the virus to others – even if the family member has no symptoms.

For example, a parent becomes ill at work and is required to have a COVID-19 test performed to ensure that they are not infected with COVID-19 before returning to work. When that information becomes known all family members including children must return home and remain isolated at home. The testing will be performed, and all members of the family stay isolated until the results of the testing are known, (this takes 3-7 days). If the illness is confirmed all family members remain in isolation until the illness has passed (at minimum 14 days from onset). Once all family members are again healthy, they can return to normal activity including work and school.

In the case where a student becomes ill each school will have a protocol in place where the student will be isolated and returned home, any family members that are students will also be sent home and a similar process of testing, isolating during recovery and then returning to full activity will occur.

In all these steps the school representatives and public health professionals will assist the families in dealing with the interruption of normal routines.

Please understand that absent immunity and having no vaccine for COVID-19 this is the ONLY way we can contain the virus spread and protect most of the population. This emphasizes the need for EVERYONE, parents and children and community members at large, to take every possible precaution that you can to avoid COVID-19 and any other illness.

Conclusion:

The 2020-21 school year will be unlike any we have seen in our lifetimes. We are confident that if all families follow the required safeguards and actively take steps to avoid becoming ill that we can have a successful year with limited interruptions.

No one wants to become ill, nevertheless it is highly likely that illness will happen, and it will impact us all. Following your schools plan and guidance will allow for everyone effected to successfully get through whatever illness occurs. All the planning and organizing that has occurred and will continue to occur is done with the intent of protecting the health of all students, families, faculty and staff.

No plan however well-conceived will be flawless and we will likely have situations that need to be addressed on a case by case basis and perhaps changes will be made to guidance as we continue to learn more and more about COVID-19 and how it will affect us.

The Health Department will assist all the local school districts in Cowley County to make certain that whatever the situation, we all get through the months ahead and successfully complete the school term.

Stay Well!

Thomas Langer, Public Health Officer
City-Cowley County Health Department

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Appendix

Athletics and Activities:

The benefits of physical activity and participation in team-based sports is widely documented. While these activities have physical and mental developmental advantages, they also are risk-based activities that can lead to injury.

Other activities such as Band, Orchestra, Theatre Arts, Debate & Forensics and Student Clubs build lifetime skills and provide personal benefits that are also well documented.

In normal years students and families weigh the pros and cons of participation in any chosen activity and generally proceed under District and KSHAA guidelines. This school year has the additional concern of increased viral illness exposures due to participation in any given sport or activity.

It is the responsibility of the Cowley County Public Health Officer to advise each family to carefully consider the risks of illness and injury when determining if a student athlete should compete in their chosen sport or activities. The overall risks to student athletes will be mitigated as much as possible through planning and close monitoring. The PHO will advise the Districts if threats to health expand due to participation as the year begins and may require the pulling back from or cancellation of interscholastic activities if circumstances within the community dictate.

The Districts and schools are working to prepare plans to keep these opportunities viable and as safe as possible. The viability of the different activities many vary greatly and as a result there is no guarantee that any student who participates will or will not become injured or ill. Each individual student and family must consider the risks involved with participation and how they may be compounded and effect their families during this school year.

One area of concern with activities are related to those that are held in indoor venues (gymnasiums, theaters, commons areas). Please be advised that crowd sizes will be restricted to allow for social distancing and other safety measures and that not all spectators wishing to attend will be permitted to attend. Any visitor to a school building MUST always wear a mask while in any school building with no exceptions. Check with your local school administration for details about your specific school.

2020-21 Cowley County Schools Gating Criteria:

During the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic response, the task of determining whether local schools should be open, and functioning is not taken lightly nor is it a decision that will be made individually in an arbitrary fashion. Careful consideration of several key indicators should be used along with input from school administration and the school nurses to make well informed decisions. Only in the most extreme situations will the Cowley County Public Health Officer order a school or district to close because of illness. If such an order were to be issued guidance would be immediately made available to school administrators about how best to handle the situation in order that school could resume as soon as possible.

It is important that all parties, (public health officer, school administrators, BOE members, school nurses, staff and patrons) involved in the education continuum understand what the health indicators are that are being monitored and at what point decisions will be made that affect the operational status of schools.

It is equally important that we look at the indicators and drill down into the data making needed interpretations that are specific to each District and school population. In treating the data in that manner we can filter out any noise from unrelated illness incidence within the County (i.e. spike in cases within the population that do not effect schools, such as a long term care facility, or other congregate setting).

The following items will be considered at the onset of the school term but may be amended as needed:

- 1: Overall COVID-19 Incidence rate and trend. Decreasing – Stable – Increasing.**
This rate is defined as the number of new cases confirmed through testing divided by the population of the County (35,500) on a rolling 2-week average. We will consider any number that does not fluctuate by more than ¼% to be stable. In Cowley County that would mean we are looking for increases or decreases of 89 positive cases over a 2-week moving period. To date our highest rates were in May & July where we saw increased numbers of approximately 50 cases in a two-week period. If we witness one-week rate jumps that are of concern the PHO will converse with the District Superintendents so that they are aware BEFORE the two-week averages cause need for action.
- 2: Weekly Cumulative Incidence Rate of active COVID-19 cases within the District: 0 to 60 Expected: 61 to 100 Concern: 101 plus Action Required:**
This rate is defined as the total average number of active COVID-19 cases by week (Mon-Fri) within each district as defined by boundaries maps. Active COVID cases are defined as determined by testing as positive and under public health quarantine. Note: Family units are not counted in aggregate but only by positive test outcomes.

3: Student Absentee Rate. <3.0% 3.1-9.9% 10%+

Based upon district absentee historical data as available. Comparing most recent year attendance data (2019-20) with current year adjusted for any modified scheduling (i.e. Students in remote learning option and not in buildings). If available this data can be compared at the specific school level within the district.

4: Faculty – Staff Absentee/Illness Rates: Variable based upon District.

This indicator will be driven by the health status of faculty and staff. Based upon weekly reports from local Districts and in consultation with administration. Recognizes the need of instructors for classes. This may affect local schools at a micro (classroom) level.

On a weekly basis (Thursdays) the data will be reviewed and discussed with the local Superintendents or their appointed point of contacts. Any negative data or foreseen declines will be discussed, and an appropriate plan of action will be developed and enacted. All deliberations will be made understanding the impact that changes in plans will have on the entire District/County population.

Communications/Rumor Control

Communication between the Public Health Officer and the local school districts is an absolute priority. Weekly communications will occur to discuss trends and concerns. It is expected that when illness arises, and individuals are removed from classrooms to isolate, that rumors will begin or demands for information will ensue. The widespread use of social media and text messaging creates nightmare scenarios for any public information officer (PIO) or administrator.

Finding the appropriate balance between transparency and privacy will set the tone for professional communication during the school year. In classroom settings when a student may have to leave for an undisclosed reason it is likely that before the student leaves the building that a large number of parents, siblings, or friends will have been told the news by other students.

It will be extremely important that we collectively do our very best to provide only factual data that does NOT include any specific identifying information (name, address, etc) of any student or family. While it is not expected that this information will remain secret based upon previously stated conditions, it should never be released publicly by a representative of a District.

It is advised that if asked questions about a possible case in any facility in your jurisdiction that you simply refer the question to the PHO or Health Department.

It is understood that you will wish to communicate within the District or school patron family information about procedures and policies and general information. Please forward copies of those correspondences to the PHO and the Health Department COVID Response Coordinator for Schools (Elizabeth Cazares) at their work email addresses so that we can maintain an adequate level of situational awareness. Our goal is to assist you and create a unified response from the Health Department and the School Districts.Ex

Public Health Order No. 20-9-01

Requiring masks or face coverings in schools and at school events.

Securing the health and well-being of Cowley County residents and providing the safest environment for education in our community is a high priority in the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local school districts and Boards of Education have worked diligently with the Cowley County Public Health Officer to craft the most reasonable health protective plans possible in order to allow the children of Cowley County to return to school and continue learning while simultaneously keeping the virus out of our schools. Health protection safeguards including; remaining home when ill, social distancing, increased hygiene and the wearing of protective masks and face coverings are being implemented in all schools to keep children and teachers safe and illness free. Reducing the spread of the virus within the County is essential to allow for uninterrupted school attendance at all levels.

Extracurricular activities are a vital part of each academic year. Sadly, all events, be they athletics or fine arts will all be affected by the pandemic this school year. Not only are the participants going to experience restrictions, so too will family and fans of these events. Limitations on crowd sizes and attendance requirements will be used in lieu of cancellation of such events so long as we can successfully keep our schools healthy.

As the Cowley County Public Health Officer, I am aware of the personal feelings that are held by individual citizens both pro and con centered around the wearing of masks and face coverings. I empathize with you and acknowledge that not all people can wear such a mask due to health conditions. Nevertheless, the proper use of masks especially in crowded spaces is proven to limit and block the spread of particulate from person to person which is how the virus is transmitted.

As such, in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to promote the health and well-being of Cowley County residents especially children, faculty and staff in our schools the following public health order is issued as authorized by K.S.A. 65-202.

All individuals wishing to enter any school venues or buildings including sports stadiums or game sites must properly wear a protective mask or face-covering as follows:

- When standing in lines at gates, restrooms or concession areas.
- When entering or exiting the facilities as part of a crowd.
- When seated in areas outdoors (including stadiums & fields) where adequate social distancing cannot be maintained.
- When inside school buildings for any reason.
- When attending indoor school events including sports.

This order will take effect on Friday, September 4, 2020 and remain in effect for the duration of the 2020-2021 school year or until such time that the pandemic threat has passed, and the order is rescinded.



September 2, 2020

Thomas Langer, MPA
Cowley County Public Health Officer