

CUYAHOGA COUNTY

BOARD OF HEALTH

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July 30, 2020

Our agency has been working closely with the State of Ohio, community officials and local K-12 school administrators as they plan and develop strategies for bringing students back to school this year.

During our conversations about COVID-19 activity in Cuyahoga County, these critical factors have been repeatedly analyzed and considered:

- Average number of daily cases – this number more than tripled between mid-June and mid-July
- Community capacity to test children – this is currently very limited
- Hospital activity – they continue to experience increasing levels of outpatient visits and hospitalizations, including intensive care admissions, related to COVID-19
- Non-congregate settings - a high percentage of recent cases have occurred in non-congregate settings
- Number of cases – local activity has been identified as being in the “high incidence” category by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Ohio Public Health Advisory System – we are currently rated as Level 3/Red. Only Level 4/Purple is higher in terms of risk for transmission of COVID-19
- Positivity rates as shown by testing – these have been climbing over the last month
- School-related settings - we have investigated multiple reports of clusters of cases in sports and other “return to play” activities

Along with maintaining a safe learning environment for students and staff, a number of questions have arisen related to preparation for sports competitions this fall. These and other extracurricular activities may not be conducive to the use of protective measures like social distancing or the use of facial coverings during participation. Additionally, activities such as band, theater and choir also have the potential to increase transmission through spread of respiratory droplets.

Without the implementation of these primary prevention strategies, the potential for COVID-19 transmission between athletes, trainers and coaching staff dramatically increases. Transmission that may occur in these settings has the potential to spread elsewhere in the general community.

The actions of individual students, staff and their families coupled with the ability for schools to provide a safe learning environment using protective strategies will also have a major impact on the viability and safety of extracurricular activities, including athletics.

The data clearly indicate that the current level of community transmission of COVID-19 is significant. Consequently, we need to limit our activities and do all we can to prevent spread by wearing facial coverings, maintaining social distancing, increasing handwashing and high touch surface cleaning, staying home when ill, working remotely when possible and following state public health orders.

With these critical factors in mind, we offer the following recommendations to schools within our health jurisdiction:

Begin the 2020-21 school year operating remotely due to the elevated health risk posed to students, staff and family members.

Discontinue extracurriculars such as sports, band, theater, choir and other activities during the remote learning period.

We understand the concerns about these recommendations, particularly related to the impact they may have on under-resourced school districts that serve low-income communities of color. However, we are equally concerned about the risk of COVID-19 transmission in these same school districts, as our current data indicate that African-Americans are three times more likely to be positive for COVID-19.

Weighing all of these challenges, we believe this approach will allow both school administrators and public health officials to continue to assess the risk level for community disease transmission on a weekly basis and assist in creating the safest possible environments for students, staff and their families. Any changes to this approach will be determined by evaluating data from a range of relevant state and local sources, including:

- COVID-19 testing positivity rates
- Ohio Public Health Advisory System metrics
- Relevant clinical and epidemiologic indicators as identified above
- Tracking the incidence of new COVID-19 cases

Media inquiries

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