

July 27, 2020

Public School Board Members of Nemaha County
Public School Administrators of Nemaha County
Unified School Districts 113, 115, 380

RE: Return to School Guidelines

Dear School Board Members and Unified School District Administrators,

The eight practicing physicians of Nemaha County stand united in the following comments and recommendations.

COVID-19 infections continue to surge in the state of Kansas and pose a formidable threat to the health of the public. As we make preparations for a successful return to school our students, families, teachers and administrators are in need of sound public health guidance and recommendations for mitigating the spread of COVID-19.

It is generally agreed upon that the physical presence of students and teachers in school is the optimal mode of delivery of quality education. However, it is widely accepted amongst medical professionals and public health officials that close contact involving large crowds within closed spaces is high risk activity for clustering and viral outbreak. Therefore, the physical presence of students and teachers in school will promote this clustering and outbreak potential and will inherently increase the risk of uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 and other communicable diseases.

The Governor of the State of Kansas in cooperation with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, the Kansas State Department of Education and the American Academy of Pediatrics have each issued detailed operational guidelines for the use of masks, regular temperature checks, frequent hand sanitation, and other social distancing measures during school sessions. We agree that these practices are the most reliable measures for control of COVID-19 and other communicable diseases.

We recognize the potential grievances and discomfort that these major social and personal changes will require of the public, including our children. We also recognize that mask wearing, particularly in young children could pose a potential for mild communication difficulties, social hinderances and mask compliance issues. However, we unanimously and emphatically agree that the value of universal mask wearing for disease control in congregate settings far outweighs any potential minor hardships. Furthermore, proper mask wearing does not pose any significant health risks to individuals, except in extreme and rare instances. Furthermore, it should be stated that proper masking is a cornerstone public health measure that has been proven time and again to significantly prevent and reduce the spread of communicable airborne illness, such as COVID-19.

We recognize that the rural location and relatively sparse population of our county is an asset at this time, but also caution you that to date we have identified many COVID infections and we expect many more to come throughout the following months. The health and safety of our children is paramount and we are fortunate that severe disease from COVID-19 is rare in children. However, this county has a large subpopulation of high risk individuals, including many teachers, school employees, and family members of students. Children can certainly be vectors of this disease.

Additionally, it is fact, as evidenced by yearly history, that many common communicable diseases spread rapidly and thoroughly through the school aged population when school activities are in session. In this particular school year, any person with symptoms of an infectious disease will be precluded from school attendance until the proper isolation and quarantine guidelines and desirable testing recommendations are followed. Those isolation and quarantine guidelines may require days, if not weeks, of school absenteeism, not only for the infected student, teacher, or staff member but possibly also for the household contacts of that person.

In all due consideration, the unmitigated spread of infectious diseases, especially COVID-19, will severely impact the ability for schools to remain operational and effective at delivering quality education to the students of this county.

Therefore, it is the unanimous opinion of the eight practicing physicians of Nemaha County and the Nemaha County public health officer that the school districts of Nemaha County abide in full compliance with the guidelines put forth by the bodies of expertise as listed above. Furthermore, we recommend that each school district work within their means to adopt the custom procedures and detailed operational processes to ensure compliance in a reliable and meaningful way and to include local health authorities for guidance and practical input in this regard.

Thank you for your dedication to our children and families.

Sincerely,

Dr. Tony Bartkoski
Dr. Kevin Kennally
Dr. James Longabaugh
Dr. Heather Myers
Dr. Jarod Snyder
Dr. Angela Stueve
Dr. Chris Tramp
Dr. Gregg Wenger
Jane Sunderland, RN