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JCDHE releases updated guidance for the upcoming school year

(JOHNSON COUNTY, Kansas – July 16) The Johnson County Department of Health and Environment’s (JCDHE) distributed a [letter to school superintendents](#) with guidance on COVID-19 prevention and control for the 2021-2022 school year. JCDHE’s primary goal remains to keep Johnson County schools open so that children can learn and benefit from interactions with others. JCDHE is committed to working with school districts to promote and maintain safe and healthy school environments.

The guidance includes a multi-layered approach with four primary evidence-based mitigation strategies:

1. Promote vaccination.
2. Require indoor mask wearing among those who are not fully vaccinated.
3. Exclude persons with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infection.
4. Exclude close contacts of confirmed COVID-19 cases.

These strategies are consistent with the recently updated K-12 school guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC issued guidance allowing for most people who have been fully vaccinated to resume activities they did prior to the pandemic. However, substantial risks remain to those who are not fully vaccinated, including children under age 12 years for whom there is no currently authorized vaccine.

“Although transmission of the virus has decreased substantially compared to this time last year, we must remain vigilant,” said Dr. Sanmi Areola, JCDHE director. “We are starting to see concerning increases in cases. We want a return to normalcy, but we need to be cautious and get vaccinated if eligible.”

The highly transmissible Delta variant is now the dominant strain in Johnson County, resulting in an increase in new cases and numerous outbreaks associated with summer camps and school-age programs. Currently authorized vaccines are highly effective at preventing COVID-19 transmission and severe illness, including the Delta variant. However, less than 40% of children aged 12-17 years in Johnson County have been fully vaccinated. JCDHE urges the strong promotion of vaccination among eligible students, faculty and staff.

Wearing a mask is a critical element of student and staff safety in school buildings. Analysis of data from the 2020-2021 school year demonstrates the effectiveness of mask wearing, including during full, in-person learning. Among masked classmates who were within three feet of a positive individual, less than 1% were infected. JCDHE recommends that school boards implement a policy that requires indoor mask wearing among persons who are not fully vaccinated.

Dr. Areola, JCDHE Deputy Director Charlie Hunt and Director of Epidemiology Elizabeth Holzschuh will host a Facebook Live event at 10:30 a.m., Monday, July 19, to discuss this guidance further. Watch on @jocogov.

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