

The logo for Johnson County, Kansas, Health & Environment. It features the text "JOHNSON COUNTY" in a large, serif font, with "KANSAS" in a smaller, sans-serif font below it. A sun icon is positioned between "JOHNSON" and "COUNTY". Below the county name, the words "Health & Environment" are written in a bold, sans-serif font.

JOHNSON COUNTY  
KANSAS  
Health & Environment

September 8, 2020

Good afternoon -

I want to provide an update after my meeting with the school superintendents earlier today. First, I want to reiterate that I want our children to be in school and participate in extracurricular activities.

As a community, many activities are not limited – our businesses, bars and restaurants are open. There are multiple activities going on across the county. Sports teams from other jurisdictions are playing in Johnson County parks and fields regularly. Now, mitigation efforts largely depend on a mask mandate, public education and our community members following expert advice in terms of wearing masks, physical distancing and other measure to minimize the spread of COVID-19.

The increased activities are contributing to the high level of community spread in our county. That also translates into a high risk of introduction of the COVID-19 virus into our school buildings.

The Johnson County Department of Health and Environment (JCDHE) recognizes the desire to allow extracurricular activities in our schools and that decisions have been made to allow these activities in most cases. These are very difficult decisions and the perceptions and requests of the communities must be taken into consideration.

JCDHE released the gating criteria for schools earlier in July. We stressed that the overarching consideration is to protect the health and well-being of students, teachers, school staff and families by carefully considering all risks and benefits of social interactions and learning that reopening schools offer. JCDHE was clear that the guidelines were a starting point for school administrators and parents/caregivers to make decisions on what is best for their school community and individual family. This pandemic response continues to evolve, with frequent new considerations.

School districts, working with parents, have chosen the paths that include allowing athletics and other extracurricular activities. From a public health viewpoint, based on the level of transmission in the community, JCDHE does not recommend conducting high risk activities, where close contact and an inability to wear masks leads to an increased risk of exposure. However, as the districts are choosing to open in different ways, JCDHE's role is to take these into consideration in providing public health recommendations and guidance that will prevent and minimize the impacts of COVID-19 on our students, teachers and staff.

As such, I want to acknowledge that our school districts have worked very hard to put rigorous measures in place to support safe opening principles. JCDHE will continue to work with school districts to prevent transmission and respond as necessary.

Here are the three areas to highlight:

1. Help prevent introduction of infections into schools. This is impacted by the high community spread. The schools have several measures in place to address this concern:
  - a. Daily symptoms screening – staying home when sick even with minimal symptoms
  - b. Physical distancing
  - c. Face masks
  - d. Hand hygiene
  - e. Increased ventilation
2. Reduce the risk of further transmission when infections are introduced in schools. The availability of broad testing – saliva tests, primarily - is going to be very helpful to our public health interventions. The schools have several measures in place that will help:
  - a. Limit room occupancy and physical distancing
  - b. Increase ventilation
  - c. Reduce singing and shouting indoors
  - d. Hold many activities in the outdoors
  - e. Teach students the proper ways to sneeze and cough especially as we enter this allergy season
3. Help prevent large outbreaks. This can be achieved by limiting secondary transmission to the fewest number of people. Again, the ability to test broadly will be very helpful in making decisions here and keeping kids in schools. Testing and symptoms screening will help with early virus detection.
  - a. Cohort as much as possible. This is more feasible in elementary schools. But also, athletic teams and other extracurricular activities can put students in cohorts.
  - b. Symptom surveillance and diagnostic testing can help better define cohorts for quarantine measures.

To be clear, JCDHE is seeing more infections in children and adolescents. Existing scientific knowledge points to the fact that most young people are asymptomatic or have mild symptoms, although they may spread the virus as much as older adults.

High-risk athletics, because of excessive exhalation, close physical contact, and a lack of masks, presents an increased risk of exposure. Similar risks exist with band and choir rehearsals/performances that do not implement mitigation measures. Therefore, if the schools must allow these at this time, they should ensure they take adequate safety precautions to minimize risks. Steps include cohorting to minimize the number of contacts, preventive random sampling (the ability to test many times with saliva samples will help), limiting spectator attendance to immediate family members, and monitoring symptoms are some steps that can help reduce risks.

This is not a time to host house parties or allow your children to attend one. Everyone needs to wear masks, practice physical distancing, stay home when ill and wash hands frequently to break the cycle of transmission in Johnson County.

Finally, I do want to express an appreciation for the commitments of our superintendents, school nurses and parents to the health of our children, teachers and staff.

Thank you,



Sanmi Areola