Neosho School District
Quarantine Procedure Release
September 21, 2020

On September 15, 2020 the Neosho School District implemented a procedure change based upon updated guidance from the Newton County Health Department. The updated guidance allowed close contacts of a Covid-19 positive person to stay in school under strict monitoring. The school districts of Newton County worked with the local health department administrator, Mr. Larry Bergner, to develop the new guidance. NSD continues to support the work Mr. Bergner is doing to support public health for all individuals of the county. We appreciate his common sense, data-driven approach to examining how best to serve the needs of our students.

NSD students, especially at the older grade levels have been doing an excellent job of wearing their face coverings. NSD has also experienced a relatively low number of positive student cases (as of 9/18, NSD had nine active student cases, 0.24% of the student population). However, the number of students quarantined for being a close contact were 191; 5%. The following are just a few of the many reasons the Newton County Health Department guidelines were adopted on the 15th.

1) When students are quarantined they miss 10 days of instruction. That means 191 quarantined students causes 1910 lost days of school. They can’t just jump into a virtual class, so their education is throttled. In no other situation would an educator believe that is okay. Teachers, in our district, have shared the frustrations and depression their children have experienced when they fall behind in tough courses.

2) Students who test positive are sometimes being harassed, because their positive test sent other students home. In addition, there is evidence that students may not be getting tested, because they don’t want the stigma of being “that one.” This seems counterproductive.

3) Many students are not quarantining outside of school. This means that they may pick up the virus on day 14 of their quarantine and bring it into the school. We have many protocols in place to make school a safe place. We can’t make that guarantee about the retail stores, activities, and other places frequented during the quarantine.

4) Students’ emotional and nutritional well-being could be suffering. Mr. Bergner, local health department administrator, reports an increase in the number of domestic abuse complaints. Where does the mental and emotional health of our students factor into the equation of public health policy?

5) The number of students who become positive while on quarantine is a small number, and it is hard to determine if it was from contact at school, home, or the community.

6) If positive cases started to climb with the new procedures in place, we could always dial it back down to put the quarantines back in place.
As advocates of students, we felt we were in a strong position to argue on their behalf, follow our local health department guidance, and monitor how the change impacted our numbers. Others saw it differently. Officials from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, who are good partners with NSD, and the state health department reached out to Jim Cummins, NSD Superintendent, and Larry Bergner to voice their displeasure with us breaking ranks. The basics of the conversation were that we were setting ourselves up for lawsuits, putting people in jeopardy, and in no way could they support our efforts. MUSIC, the insurance company that represents most, if not all, Newton County schools, debunked the fact that the schools would not be covered. We are covered if we follow the guidelines of our local health department. At this point, our local representatives, also supportive of the change, got involved as it became a political matter of local control.

On Sunday afternoon, local superintendents, state representatives, board members and Mr. Bergner met with Adam Crumbliss, Director of the Division of Community and Public Health. Mr. Crumbliss reiterated the desire of the state department for us to be patient as changes may be coming. Dr. Cummins asked what assurances we could have that if we “pump the brakes” on changing the policy, the state department would continue to seek ways to avoid students' educations being put at risk. Mr. Crumbliss committed to the group that their work is ongoing to look at the current protocols. He even indicated that there may be some changes coming from the CDC.

What started out as a quiet effort to determine if we could keep students in school without having a spike in positive cases, became a political issue. People within the medical community reached out in support of both sides of the matter; some saying to keep the students in school, others wanting to continue with the 14-day quarantine. Over the weekend, NSD issued a questionnaire to the 700+ district employees. As of Monday morning, 276 had responded. Of the respondents, 160 (58%) favored keeping the students in school rather than the 14-day quarantine. Of those with students in the school district, 63% favored keeping them in school. Overall, the feedback to the state representatives seemed to be similar; a small majority favoring the looser procedures. NSD feels as though there is support for the relaxed procedures, but not a mandate.

The Neosho School District has a great deal of momentum at this time with many positives occurring throughout the district. Now is not the time to bring unwanted attention upon the district. Dr. Cummins expressed gratitude for Mr. Bergner, the relaxed procedures and the other superintendents of Newton County for the work they have done.

At this point, NSD will be reverting to the 14-day quarantine policy. Students who returned to school from quarantine last week will remain in school. Starting Tuesday, September 22, the contact tracing team will go back to sending close contacts home for their quarantine. It is our hope that there is action at the state and national level to review the costs/benefits of the current policies. As of a week ago, in Missouri, there had been no deaths from Covid-19 in 0-17 year olds. However, we cannot measure the impact of the social pressure, emotional stress,
nutritional void, educational loss, and other impacts this virus is having on our students when they are quarantined, or have to decide whether or not to get tested. We are thankful for the voices in our community that spoke up and promise to continue to weigh what is best for our students, staff, community, and the long-term success of NSD.

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