



Williamson County and Cities Health District

355 Texas Avenue | Round Rock, TX 78664



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Deb Strahler
512-248-7629

WILLIAMSON COUNTY AND CITIES HEALTH DISTRICT ISSUES STATEMENT ON SCHOOL RE-OPENING

July 28, 2020 - As schools look to their options for offering classes this fall, many have asked the Williamson County and Cities Health District (WCCHD) to make a determination as to whether it is safe to offer on-campus classes, and what “safe” might look like in terms of hard numbers. We realize that this is a complex issue, and that there is a need to balance the immediate threat of COVID-19 with consideration for other important health factors, like social and emotional development, childcare, and physical activity.

WCCHD and school administrators are actively collaborating to address these concerns and determine the best way to assess risk and decisions using available evidence.

On July 24, the CDC released new guidance stressing that on-campus re-openings should be prioritized wherever possible, but that schools in COVID-19 “hotspots” should consider delaying the start of on-campus classes. On the CDC conference call, hotspots were defined as areas with 5% or higher test positivity rate.

While there are encouraging signs that community-based viral transmission may be starting to plateau or even decline, COVID-19 is still rampant across Central Texas, including here in Williamson County. Our current countywide testing positivity rate is 17.58% – over three times the threshold for a “hotspot.” Our current rate of *new* cases is averaging around 12 per 100k people, per day – nearly *17 times higher* than the CDC’s threshold for “low incidence.”

At current levels of viral activity in our communities, increased social contact through on-campus classes and extracurricular activities still has the potential to result in more infections and additional spread of the coronavirus, including the possibility of hospitalizations and deaths amongst those in close contact. While prevalence of *acute* illness tends to be higher in other age groups, schoolchildren comprise around 8% of all known cases, and may transmit the virus to others, including at-risk teachers, staff, friends, and family. As such, remote/virtual learning carries the *least* risk for the spread of COVID-19, due to reduced social contact.

On July 28, the Texas Attorney General’s office ruled that the Governor’s GA-28 Directive overrules local Health Authority Orders, and that such orders cannot be issued for schools on a pre-emptive, preventative basis. The Attorney General instructed schools to follow TEA guidance.

<https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/news/releases/ag-paxton-issues-legal-guidance-school-reopening>)

School administrators know their communities and can best determine what level of risk is acceptable to their particular constituency. WCCHD is working with schools to develop local guidance on:

- How school systems might re-open, to include the possibility of a delayed start for on-campus, face-to-face instruction and extracurricular activities until a decline in community-based transmission is demonstrated according to specific indicators, like a two-week decline in new cases and decreased test positivity rate
- Virtual instruction, per a school system's own plan
- School plans to minimize the potential for disease spread once on-campus instruction and activities resume

Since the virus crosses boundaries and jurisdictions just as people do, this collaborative, coordinated effort by all of the County's ISDs and schools is the best approach to halt the virus' spread across our County and region. The CDC and TEA provide guidance on risk and planning for schools and extracurricular activities like team sports:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html> ,

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/youth-sports.html>.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/prepare-safe-return.html>

<https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/health-safety-discipline/covid/coronavirus-covid-19-support-and-guidance>

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