



To: All Unified School Districts and Schools in Crawford County, Kansas

From: The Office of the Health Officers, Crawford County Health Department

Re: Benchmark Data for Recommendation to Move to Mask-Optional in Crawford County Schools

Date: 10 September, 2021

Situation:

The Health Department published and presented the recommendations to the School Districts of Crawford regarding mitigation strategies for the schools on 30 July, 2021. These recommendations included universal masking in schools to prevent spread of Covid-19 and several other mitigation strategies. In an effort to improve communication and understanding, the following benchmarks are published, including justifications, that would change the recommendation to mask-optional in the schools. The remaining mitigation recommendations in the document will remain in place through the school year regardless of benchmark achievement at this time.

Detail:

The benchmarks used are from the Navigating Change document from the Kansas Department of Education, which is the gating criteria format currently used in community communications. The primary sections of the gating criteria for benchmarking will be:

1. 2 week cumulative County incidence rate (# new cases/100K over prior 2 weeks)
2. Trend in County incidence rate
3. Local / referring hospital capacity
4. Student/Staff Absenteeism due to COVID-19 based on number enrolled plus staff level.

The benchmarks will use the yellow category as the minimum acceptable to change recommendations for universal masking to mask-optional in schools, with the exception of absenteeism, which will require the green category.

Justification:

Each category will be discussed individually below.

Category 1: **2 week cumulative County incidence rate** (# new cases/100K over prior 2 weeks) in the **yellow or green** category. This represents a community rate of infection of maximum



≤40 new cases weekly (actual cases), or ≤100 new cases/100K. It would be unreasonable to expect the case rate count to be zero in the community before recommending change in the schools to mask optional. Likewise, it is unrealistic to expect change in recommendations if the case rate is above this level as it increases risk of involvement in the schools, despite the other mitigations in place.

Category 2: **Trend in County incidence rate**. It is important that the trend is stable or declining to recommend change. To ensure the trend is stable, two weeks of data meeting categories 1-3 will need to be in the **yellow or green** range to meet the benchmark.

Category 3: **Local / referring hospital capacity** in the **yellow or green** category. This category represents the medical capability in the community to care for all patients, regardless of COVID status. Hospital capacity is defined as the number of beds available, with weight toward the ICU capacity. While there are 2 hospital systems in the county, weight will be given to Ascension Via Christi Pittsburg and their ICU capacity as the higher level center. The hospitals are working together to manage bed space. Capacity discussions occur at least weekly on Friday, and occur more frequently if capacity is a concern. Referring hospital capacity refers to the ability to transfer patients to higher level hospitals for critical needs such as dialysis, neurosurgical care, ICU care, pediatric care, trauma, etc. This discussion also occurs at least weekly between the hospitals and more frequently as needed. Typical transfer hospitals include the Joplin, Springfield and Kansas City areas and the Children's centers are KU Medical Center and Children's Mercy Hospital System in Kansas City, MO.

Category 4: **Student/Staff Absenteeism due to COVID-19** based on number of students enrolled plus staff level for each building in the **green** category. This category will require knowing the average attendance for each building, including staff. While the original gating criteria used only student information and included all causes for absenteeism, the evaluated category will only include absences related to COVID-19. The category will include both ill students and quarantined students not in school. The category will require less than 3.0% absenteeism to meet the criteria for mask optional. The benchmark allows for some infections in school but limits infections and absences to those related to COVID-19. Kansas law limits students to no more than 40 hours of out-of-school learning to maintain funding. Excess authorization is only allowed with by-name approval from the Department of Education. This is both cumbersome and costly to the schools. Category 4 is set to limit this impact on systems. Category 4 is evaluated when schools are in the mask-optional state and will be applied individually to each building. This would mean that a system may be mask-optional, but an individual school may be in universal masking due to local outbreak. This is done to minimize impact across systems when the true impact is only in one building.



For graphic related to school gating criteria, please follow the link below.

<https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/Communications/Navigating%20Change/Gating%20Criteria%20Graphic.pdf?ver=2021-02-12-104736-693>

Crawford County Benchmark Criteria to Recommend Mask-Optional Learning

Category	1 County incidence rate	2 Trend in County incidence rate	3 Local / referring hospital capacity	4 Student/Staff Absenteeism
Benchmark	≤40 cases per week	Stable or decreasing over two weeks	20 % or greater with regional referring capacity	Less than 3 % absences related to COVID-19

The benchmark data points were vetted with the School Administrations, Local Hospital Facility and Medical Leadership, Local Community Medical Leadership and the Health Officers.

Additional Considerations

The community, schools and children will all benefit if the community is in the mask-optional state as this indicates low level of infection in the community. In an effort to achieve and remain in this state, it is important that eligible individuals get vaccinated as this will help prevent infection and decrease spread of Covid-19 in schools. Vaccination also will decrease the impact of quarantine related absences.

Another strategy to reduce quarantine related absences is the test to stay and test to play strategy. It is important to note that masking will be required for any student participating in this strategy to prevent unanticipated spread of Covid to other students, even if the school is mask-optional.