



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

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

Re: Update: New Calculation for Absenteeism Rate for Benchmark Data for Recommendation for Mask-Optional state in Crawford County Schools

Date: 17 December, 2021

Situation:

The Health Department published and presented the recommendations to the School Districts of Crawford County regarding Benchmark Data for Mask Optional State on 10 September, 2021 with updated recommendation on 15 November 2021. Previous recommendations regarding masking relied on Category 4 information for absenteeism in schools for recommendation for masking. This will remain but the category has updated definition due to new data for in-school transmission and thorough implementation of testing programs in all school systems in the district.

Detail:

The previous 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 have been:

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 previous benchmarks used the category 1, 2 and 3 in yellow category as the minimum acceptable to change recommendations from universal masking to mask-optional in schools, with the exception of absenteeism, which required the green category.

Category 4 calculation previously encompassed all students and staff with current infection for Covid-19 (in isolation) plus all students and staff not currently in school due to quarantine for in-school or out-of-school exposure. New calculation for Category 4 will include those in isolation and those in home quarantine due to home exposure but not due to in school exposure.



The County Health Officers and Health Department will utilize Category 4 as the main benchmark for recommendation to schools for mask optional state. While Category 4 will be the main data point for recommendation, the Health Officers and Health Department will retain the right to utilize additional data in making recommendations to the school systems as appropriate.

Justification:

Since inception of the Benchmark Data, the Health Officers have continued to closely monitor the community infection rate and rate of infection for the schools. Absenteeism rate is monitored daily by school and by building to determine impact to each system. Beginning 3 January, 2022, absenteeism rate calculation will include both students and staff out for infection (isolation) and those out due to high risk home exposure (quarantine). The calculation will not include quarantine due to school exposure but opted out of testing.

Since the initiation of the Benchmark Criteria, transmission rates have been closely monitored. Justification for change in calculation of absenteeism rate encompasses many factors. These include:

1. Each school system within the county has the test-to-stay program allowing for close monitoring of students at-risk for infection. This program allows for certain in-school high risk exposures to remain in school and has significantly limited quarantine and in-school transmission.
2. Vaccination, previous immunity, the test to stay monitoring strategy and other mitigation measures are effective currently at minimizing school impact.
3. The in-school transmission/conversion rate has been limited and is much lower than transmission/conversion rate from in-home exposure as noted in monitoring data.
4. Previous absenteeism rate utilized all exposures as it was not clear what type of exposure presented the highest risk in transmission. Those that were exposed at school have the option for the test-to-stay program which would then not count in the absenteeism rate. There is a subset of these students and staff who elect to quarantine at home instead of utilizing the testing program and this previously impacted absenteeism rate. This subset will no longer count towards absenteeism rate as this group presents lower risk. It is highly recommended that all in-school exposures take advantage of the testing program as there is still risk of transmission and illness.
5. Vaccination is available to school age children 5 and older.
6. Community vaccination is available to all persons ages 5 and older and boosters are available to certain groups as well.
7. Vaccination has proven to be very effective at preventing serious illness or death, especially in the at-risk and elderly population.



- 8. Fully vaccinated students and staff would not be quarantined if exposed.
- 9. Vaccination is available at no cost to any eligible person who seeks it at the Crawford County Health Department, Community Health Centers of Southeast Kansas, SEK Urgent Care and most local pharmacies.

Benchmark Information:

Category 4: **Student/Staff Absenteeism due to COVID-19** based on number of students enrolled plus staff level for each building. 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 due to in-home exposure. The category will require less than 3.0% absenteeism to meet the criteria for mask optional recommendation from the Health Officers. 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 daily and will be applied individually to each building in a school system. 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.

**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



### Additional Considerations

The initial benchmark document and recommendations were in place as one part of a strategy to mitigate spread of Covid 19 within the community and to protect at-risk individuals from infections. Monitoring of transmission rates for in-school and out-of-school exposures has been ongoing and shows in-home exposures present greatest risk of transmission. Current mitigation strategies, coupled with immunity from vaccination and previous infection as well as significant improvement in testing/monitoring programs in the schools has proven effective in minimizing the spread of Covid 19 in the schools at the current level of community spread. Current data suggest that the greatest risk to schools is ongoing infection and spread through community exposure from outside of the school (at home exposures).

The consideration for the safety and health of the community is also a concern when determining the need for masks and other mitigation recommendations for schools and the community. Fortunately, the single greatest mitigation strategy is readily available in the community in the form of vaccination. All eligible persons can receive the recommended vaccination through multiple sources within our community. Vaccination is proven effective at preventing serious illness and death and those at moderate or greatest risk have had ample time to receive the vaccine. The vaccine is now available to children 5 and older.

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 school. 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.**

Despite the recommended mask state of each school, any person in the community or in school may wear a mask if so desired.