



Health Officer

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elkhartcountyhealth.org

Elkhart County Health Department

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There has been a flurry of activity and concern about the upcoming school year, and how the schools will provide education while keeping students and staff safe. School officials have spent months learning how to get the students back in school safely and determine what would work in their buildings. The school administrators have been in close contact with the Department of Education, Indiana State Department of Health, and the Elkhart County Health Department to see what the recommendations are, what the county's level of virus activity is, and how to keep staff and students best safe.

Elkhart County has been a "hot spot" for the novel coronavirus for weeks. This increased risk for school openings has presented concerns for student and staff safety. However, late last week, and continuing this week, we have seen the positivity rate start to decline. Experience from other hot spots shows that once the viral spread starts to decline, it continues downward rapidly. Elkhart County seems to be following that pattern. The number of positive tests, the hospitals' capacity to care for the sick, and our on-going ability to do testing and contact tracing are being continuously monitored.

Because of this control of the spread of the virus, and the work the schools have done, I recommend they open for in-person instruction as they have planned. The mitigation measures they have put in place are designed to make the schools as safe as possible. There remains a small risk, just as there is when children are in the grocery store, playground, or a friend's house. However, the advantages of in-person instruction outweigh that small risk at this time. I encourage most students and families to take advantage of this opportunity. Students who may be at high risk of severe disease if exposed to the virus, or living with a family member, who may be at high risk, can obtain their education via the online plans the corporations are providing, and avoid the small chance of contact with the virus at school.

I am aware the ISHSAA has posted their guidance to begin sports as previously planned, with mitigation measures for each athlete. I strongly urge school officials to consider this guidance carefully. Around the state, there have been cases of viral spread through teams. It has usually come not from practices, but activities before and after practice: carpooling, the team going out to eat after a workout, over to a teammate's pool to relax, etc., and not physically distancing, or using masks. These activities, along with the team meals often planned and prepared by their families,

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make this type of activity high risk for viral spread. If sports are to be successful, EVERYONE involved has to recognize that their behavior off the field determines whether the team can play at all.

Decisions to open the schools to in-person education are made by the school corporations, with advice and recommendations from the Health Department. We work closely as a team to provide the best educational opportunities for all students while ensuring viral mitigation measures are in place and actively used by all. I encourage each parent to carefully consider the needs of your child and family, talk to your child, explore your school's plans, ask questions, and make your decisions about his or her education based on all the information.

Lydia Mertz, MD
Elkhart County Health Officer

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