

MEMO

TO: School Districts in the Central Racine County Health Department Jurisdiction

FROM: Central Racine County Board of Health

RE: Strong Recommendation for School Districts to Require Face Coverings

DATE: July 16, 2020

In December of 2019, a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was identified overseas, and by January of 2020, the first cases were detected in the U.S. On March 12, Governor Tony Evers declared a Health Emergency in Response to the COVID-19 Coronavirus and Racine County Executive Jonathan Delagrave declared a State of Emergency in Racine County. On March 13, 2020, Governor Evers issued Emergency Order 1: Order for Statewide School Closure. These actions were in response to the increasing threat of COVID-19 to the health of Wisconsin and Racine County residents.

At its July 16, 2020 meeting, the Central Racine County Board of Health (BOH) commended school districts that already decided to require wearing of face coverings, and voted to strongly urge those school districts still considering in-person schooling to require all students and all staff to wear a face covering when on buses and at school. School districts that require wearing of face coverings will not only help stop the spread of COVID-19 among students and staff but will also reduce the chance that they spread it to their home environments and the community.

BACKGROUND:

When COVID-19 first hit the U.S., it rapidly became clear that healthcare workers needed to wear personal protective equipment (PPE), including N-95 masks, to protect themselves and others. Healthcare workers historically have worn face masks as have the public during previous pandemics and global outbreaks. For COVID-19, initially, the role of face coverings in preventing disease transmission in the public realm was less evident. However, on April 3, 2020, the White House Coronavirus Task Force and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended that people wear a cloth face covering in public to slow the spread of COVID-19.

A recent Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (July 14, 2020/69) pointed to the use of face coverings as an important tool to mitigate spread of COVID-19. The report noted that “among 139 clients exposed to two symptomatic hair stylists with confirmed COVID-19 while both the stylists and the clients wore face masks, no symptomatic secondary cases were reported; among 67 clients tested for SARS-CoV-2, all test results were negative. Adherence to the community’s and company’s face-covering policy likely mitigated spread of SARS-CoV-2.” Many people with COVID-19 infection are asymptomatic or presymptomatic yet highly contagious and these people account for a substantial fraction of all transmissions. Masking helps to prevent such people from spreading virus-laden secretions, whether they recognize that they are infected or not.

COVID-19 DATA:

- As of July 13, 2020, Racine County has seen 2,349 cases of COVID-19 which translates into a cumulative case rate of 1202 positive cases per 100,000 people, currently third highest in the State. The current cumulative case rate for the Central Racine County Health Department jurisdiction is 737/100,000, fifth highest in the State.
- As of July 9, 2020, children ages 0-19 represented 7.6%, 12.1% and 11% of COVID-19 cases in the U.S., Wisconsin, and the CRCHD jurisdiction, respectively. Of note, the percentage of COVID Wisconsin cases in this age group is 59% higher than the national average.
- The case rate for children ages 0-19 in Wisconsin is 19% greater than the national case rate for children ages 0-19.
- On May 29, Children's Hospital of Wisconsin reported seven suspected cases of multisystem inflammatory illness (MIS) in children in Wisconsin. Multisystem inflammatory syndrome can present with many different symptoms, including a persistent high fever, abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea, rash, swelling of the hands and feet, and red eyes and tongue.
- Limited data exists relative to school transmission considering widespread closure of schools early in the pandemic. It is still not clear if children pass COVID-19 in the manner in which they usually spread other similar diseases (e.g., the common cold and flu). More data regarding the level of contagiousness of COVID-19 among school-aged children will become available with the opening of schools.

STRONG RECOMMENDATION TO REQUIRE USE OF FACE COVERINGS:

Face coverings are recommended for use in school settings, especially when other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain. According to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in the June 2020 *Schools for Health: Risk Reduction Strategies for Reopening Schools*, "scientific evidence indicates that risk to students and staff can be kept low if schools adhere to strict control measures and systematically respond to potential outbreaks." Their specific recommendations address Healthy Classrooms, Healthy Buildings, Healthy Activities, Healthy Schedules, and Healthy Policies. *Included with Healthy Classrooms is the recommendation to wear masks.* Indeed, this recommendation is a clear thread among a great deal of growing research about the virus. There is a lot we still do not know about COVID-19, but among public health professionals locally, nationally, and internationally, there is an increasing consensus that the wearing of masks is a vitally important prevention strategy, particularly in settings such as schools with sustained interactions in closed environments. This strategy is one that should be used in conjunction with physical distancing.

In this time of intense uncertainty, we want school districts to know that we understand the difficult decisions being made about reopening, including weighing of the benefits and risks to the school community. For those school districts that choose to reopen, we ask that you consider the vital role of face covering use in schools to: 1) offer protection from being infected, 2) protect others from infection, and 3) ultimately protect loved ones and the community from infection. No child wants to be the reason that someone else gets sick. ***The bottom line is that the BOH strongly urges school districts to require the wearing of face coverings in schools and supports those already adopting this requirement.***