

July 29, 2020

Dear Franklin County School Superintendents:

The mission of Franklin County Public Health (FCPH) is to improve the health of our communities by preventing disease, promoting healthy living and protecting against public health threats through education, policies, programs and partnerships. FCPH works to incorporate equity as the foundation for conducting its daily work. Since the start of the outbreak in February 2020, FCPH has utilized multiple strategies in reducing the risk of spreading SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 including providing information and guidance to communities, businesses, residents and schools.

FCPH offered initial guidance to schools in July recommending: 1) online learning be offered to any family who requested it, 2) a blended learning environment for in-person instruction and 3) adhering to overall state guidance. As part of this initial guidance, FCPH advised that as the circumstances changed its guidance will be subject to change as well.

What is the current status of COVID-19 in Franklin County?

Put simply, COVID-19 is actively spreading across Franklin County.

- As outlined in [Figure 1](#), the average number of daily cases of COVID-19 has tripled between mid-June and mid-July
- Approximately 17% of all cases have been in persons ages 0-19
- There are clusters of cases associated with sports and other "return to play" activities
- 75% of all cases in the county are in non-congregate settings¹
- The positivity rate of testing has varied between 8-13%
- Franklin County remains Level 3 or "red" Ohio Public Health Advisory Alert System

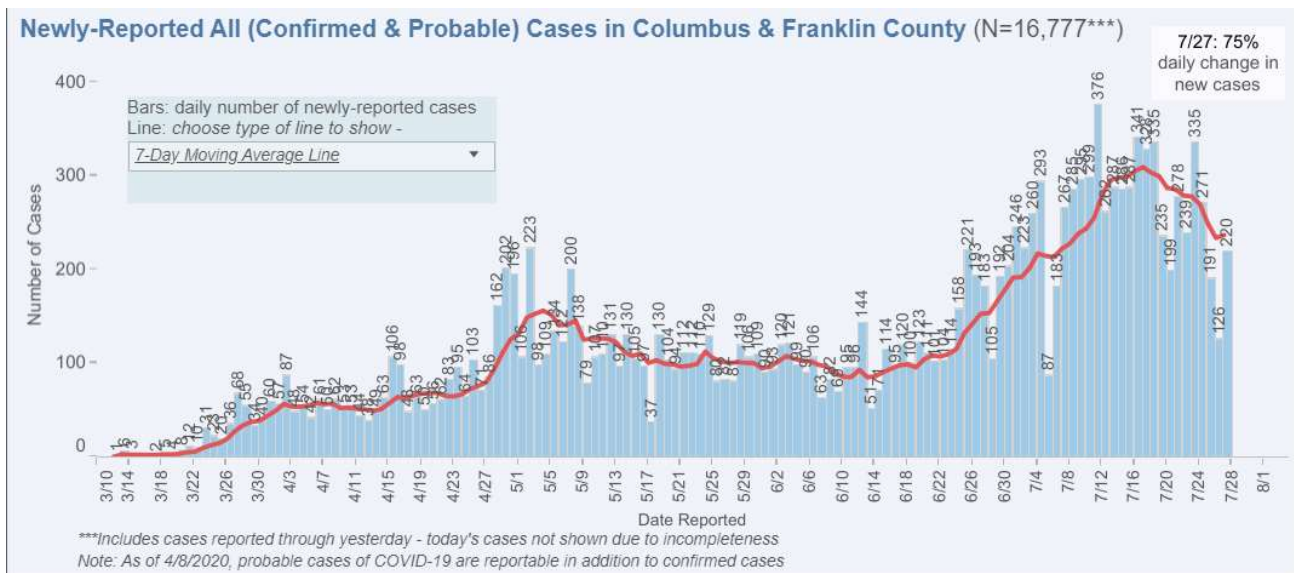


Figure 1.

¹ <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/static/OPHASM/profiles/franklin.pdf>

Could reopening schools lead to increased rates of COVID-19?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) there is evidence which suggests that reopening schools may be low risk in communities with low COVID-19 transmission rates. The CDC goes on to say that schools reopening may further increase spread in communities where transmission is already high². Based on data outlined above, it is the opinion of Franklin County Public Health our community is actively experiencing significant and sustained community transmission of the virus.

Updated Recommendations

1) FCPH is strongly recommending all schools begin the 2020-21 school year operating remotely. FCPH will be evaluating surveillance data and communicating its observations weekly with school partners as the school year begins. Specifically, FCPH will be monitoring the following:

- Overall level of risk as defined by the state public health advisory alert system
- Weekly trends in the overall number of cases and those who are school-aged
- Trends in county testing positivity rates as provided by healthcare partners

2) FCPH also recommends schools discontinue extracurricular activities such as sports, band and, other activities during the period of remote learning.

Should public health data suggest that returning to school in a hybrid or blended model would be appropriate, FCPH will strongly recommend schools:

- Make masks mandatory for all students and staff who do not have an exemption. Children 6 and under also are exempt.
- Develop seating charts for classrooms.
- Develop seating charts for buses.
- Maintain social distancing of 6 feet at all times.

Health departments and schools appreciate the economic and social inequities made more visible by the pandemic and how recommendations regarding in-person or online instruction might impact those disparities.³ Ultimately, it's the role of public health to provide the most reliable, data-driven guidance to protect the health of all residents in our community. In addition to our schools, FCPH thanks our county and local elected officials, social service agencies and childcare partners that will undoubtedly be called upon for continued and increased assistance for our families during this time.

The best opportunity for students to return to and stay in the classroom safely is to lower the risk across our community. We may be starting to see a drop in our cases in Franklin County but there is still significant progress needed before the community circumstances support bringing students back to school. FCPH continues to ask our residents to assist by wearing their face covering, maintaining appropriate physical distancing, staying home as much as possible, routinely washing hands, and when appropriate get tested for COVID-19. More information can be found on our website: <https://covid-19.myfcph.org/>.

Yours in good health,



Joe Mazzola, MPA
Franklin County Health Commissioner

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronaviru/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/reopening-schools-faqs.html>

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. Reopening K-12 Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Prioritizing Health, Equity, and Communities. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25858>.