

The logo for Johnson County, Kansas, Health & Environment. It features the text "JOHNSON COUNTY" in a large, serif font, with "KANSAS" in a smaller, sans-serif font below it. A sun icon is positioned between "JOHNSON" and "COUNTY". Below the county name, the words "Health & Environment" are written in a bold, sans-serif font.

JOHNSON COUNTY
KANSAS
Health & Environment

October 27, 2020

Superintendents-

Good afternoon.

I want to reiterate our appreciation for the tremendous work you and your staff have invested to ensure that our children are safe in school during this pandemic.

We have had infections in schools. The high level of community spread in the county means that the introduction of the COVID-19 virus into our school buildings was inevitable. Thus far, we have worked together to prevent large outbreaks and reduce the risk of secondary transmissions in schools.

This initial success is thanks to the hard work of our collective staffs to identify cases, quarantine close contacts, and institute risk mitigation policies that work, such as masking, cohorting and distancing within schools. Families have also been crucial partners, equipping their children for new school rules, following public health recommendations, and keeping their students home when they are symptomatic.

Unfortunately, today I must urge additional caution – especially as it relates to indoor sports and activities. Infections are increasing across the country and our local and regional numbers are also trending up. These numbers are expected to rise even more as it gets colder and people gather for Halloween and Thanksgiving. The impact is even more pronounced because we are entering flu season.

We will need to do more to prevent infections as we enter the cooler temperatures of fall and outdoor activities become less of an option. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, loves the indoor environment.

The Johnson County Department of Health and Environment (JCDHE) has consistently stressed that our collective goal is to protect the health and well-being of students, teachers, school staff and families. We must carefully balance the risks of in-person instruction during a pandemic with student and family social, emotional and mental health needs, as well as the long-term effectiveness of various learning modes.

We know that many of our districts are returning most of their students to in-person learning modes. The risk of infections is higher with in-person learning. Athletics and extracurricular activities increase the risk even more when there is excessive exhalation, close physical contact, and a lack of masks.

While the districts permitted these athletic activities during the summer and fall months, many were outdoor sports that allowed for some safeguards to minimize the risk of widespread transmissions. Even then, we saw many cases and quarantines associated with athletics.

Football offers the largest number of examples, but positive individuals who had close contact with others resulted in exposures and exclusions in the following activities around the county: football, soccer, volleyball, dance, cheer, cross country, band, golf and tennis.

One community had two positive cases on a football team. The initial pair of cases resulted in a total of 18 positive cases and 100 people in quarantine. In a different community, a football player who played during his infectious period resulted in quarantines for 67 of his teammates and 15 from an opposing team. Yet another football team quarantined 18 players after their team played a team with a positive case.

These numbers represent students who are unable to participate fully in school because they need to be at home for 14 days. Every school building with students in attendance in some mode have students or staff in this situation.

Indoor winter sports represent the next challenge in this school year. The risk of transmission of the virus is significantly higher indoors. Therefore, JCDHE strongly recommend that you do not allow indoor sports or activities where mitigation techniques are not possible, such as basketball or wrestling, due to the level of community transmission and consequently, the risks involved. It is significantly more difficult to implement risk mitigation measures, such as masking and distancing, in these activities. The chances of widespread transmission in schools is higher if these indoor activities are performed, especially when spectators are allowed.

If you decide against this recommendation, it is important to take adequate risk reduction precautions, including masking, cohorting teams, testing to quickly identify infections, not allowing spectators or limiting spectator attendance to immediate family members, and monitoring for symptoms.

JCDHE will continue to work with you to prevent secondary transmission and respond as necessary. Our mitigation efforts continue to depend on a mask mandate, public education and our community members following public health advice to wear masks, physical distance and other measures to minimize the spread of COVID-19.

We ask that you reinforce to parents that this is not a time to host house parties or allow their children to attend one. Everyone needs to wear masks, practice physical distancing, stay home when ill and wash hands frequently to break the cycle of transmission in Johnson County.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sanmi Areola". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'S'.

Sanmi Areola, PhD
Director, Department of Health and Environment