

November 20, 2020

Dear Pima County Families

**RE: COVID-19 SPREAD IN SCHOOLS**

This year has been incredibly challenging for our community – economically, emotionally and physically. Our schools have met these challenges with admirable flexibility and grace, and they have strived to maintain a delicate balance in protecting our community from COVID-19 while providing safe spaces for our children to gain some sense of normalcy. Students in Pima County continue to prove the adaptability of youth as they follow guidelines that help reduce the spread, changing their behaviors as research shows new insights. Pima County has endured, and as we look to 2021, we hope to keep this endurance aflame.

As we plan for the remainder of this school year, our biggest concerns remain how to provide quality education while supporting the health, safety, and well-being of students, staff, and their families. These families include elders, people with chronic health conditions, and not all have access to health care. Most Pima County schools are now offering a combination of in-person and remote (often called “hybrid”) instruction to keep students in school and safe.

At this time, **the Pima County Health Department maintains that hybrid in-person instruction is appropriate so that schools can continue to provide services that Pima County children need to succeed.** We believe in the value of in-person instruction activities for educating the whole child.

Below, we address:

- Where we are seeing school-related cases, exposures, and outbreaks
- What the data show
- The need to work together to keep schools open
- What can happen if cases continue to rise

**Where we are seeing cases and quarantined individuals**

The majority of students, teachers, and staff currently in isolation or quarantine associated with schools in Pima County did not have an exposure to COVID-19 at their school. Rather, most exposures were during activities outside of the school setting. These activities include:

- Contact sports, with highest rates in Cheer, Football and Volleyball (especially associated with team meals and social events)
- Home transmission (families not physically distancing or wearing masks when around close friends or family who do not live with them)

- Social gatherings (funerals, weddings, birthday parties, etc.)

### School-Related Outbreaks

Since the school year started, there have been at least 16 outbreaks associated with Pima County schools. Of these, seven are athletics related, involving up to 22 cases per outbreak. Others have involved group lunches without enough physical distancing. The partnerships between the schools, the community, the Health Department, and families have allowed us to identify cases quickly and isolate or quarantine those who were exposed. We continue to rely on cooperation from families in reporting positive cases and identifying close contact.

### What the data show

The more everyone masks up, washes up, and stays apart, the longer we will be able to keep schools open so students can attend in-person.

- Masks are estimated to slow the spread of COVID-19 by about 70%(Sources: [Howard, J., Huang, A, et al. 2020](#); [Wang, Y., Tian, H., et al. 2020](#); [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#); [Davies, A., Thompson, K. et al. 2013](#))
- The Health Department has reported a significant increase in positive cases across our county—mirroring the increase of positive cases across the state and region – in recent weeks.
- We are experiencing accelerated virus spread that began during the week of October 18, 2020 and continues now.

### To keep schools open, we need to work together.

Schools play a vital role in our community and economy. The chance that hybrid in-person learning will have to stop grows as the number of COVID-19 cases grows in our community.

### Keeping schools open for hybrid learning is dependent on two actions:

1. Slowing the spread of COVID-19 within the walls of school buildings.
2. Preventing and slowing the spread of COVID-19 throughout our community.

If the rate of cases continues to trend upward, the Health Department may recommend additional restrictions to curb the current rate of spread, resulting in a recommendation to shift to fully remote learning for all school districts.

It is essential that we all work together to slow the spread of COVID-19 in our communities with the same determination that allowed us to successfully reopen our schools earlier this fall. **We should follow the necessary protocols that have worked to provide safe environments in our schools: wear a mask, watch your distance, and wash your hands.** Parents should continue to screen your students for the onset of symptoms before the start of each day, and keep them home if they are sick.

You, our students, school staff, and families, have important roles in slowing the spread of COVID-19. By following recommendations both inside and outside of your school campus, you support the health of the entire community. Thank you for your continuous flexibility, understanding, and strength during this unprecedented school year

In partnership,



Dr. Theresa Cullen  
Director, Pima County Health Department



Dustin J. Williams  
Pima County Superintendent of Schools