

USET Tribal Epidemiology Center

Recommendations for Tribal Consideration

USET TEC COVID-19 Guidance 2020-009: School Reopening



Background

In response to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), many schools were forced to close in early spring to protect students and staff. As the number of COVID-19 cases continues to increase daily, it is essential to refer to science and evidence-based data to support school decisions regarding in-person or virtual learning for the 2020-2021 school year. Although the number of cases among school age children is increasing, it is unclear if younger school age children are a significant source of COVID-19 transmission. Current data show the pandemic is not contained with more than 5,023,649 cases and 161,842 deaths as of August 10, 2020, in the United States.

Scientists, pediatricians, teachers, and parents all agree and understand the importance of in-person schooling for children of all age groups. In-person education is vital for positive mental health outcomes, improved learning environment, and the decreased chances of children going without food; however the risk to public health must be weighed against the known benefits if in-person schooling.

Several factors must be assessed when determining if it is safe to fully or partially open schools for in-person learning. These considerations must include the current epidemiology of the pediatric COVID-19 cases in the United States, the ability to implement Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) recommendations to prevent and slow the rate of COVID-19 transmission, and the long term potential impacts on the health and well-being of students, education staff, and the community.

The current epidemiology of US pediatric COVID-19 cases:

- About 2% of all cases are < 18 years of age
- About 20% of these cases are hospitalized
- To date, there have been 17 known pediatric deaths from COVID-19
- Children aged five and under have a higher viral load than people ages six and older
- The current rate of transmission among children is unknown
- Research suggests the possibility of COVID-19 transmission via aerosolization or through airborne droplets

Factors to Consider for Safe School Reopening

- The level of local community infections and the number of reported new cases over a period of time in the school's surrounding area must be low enough that transmission can be controlled
- The ability to maintain 6-ft distance between students and staff at all times
- The ability to enforce mandatory masks and handwashing for both students and staff
- The ability to implement mass testing, temperature checks, and contact tracing for positive cases and potential exposures
- The percentage of student and staff that have underlying medical conditions and risk factors that increase their chances of contracting COVID-19 and poorer health outcomes
- The percentage of students and staff living in multi-generational households
- The ability to limit the use of shared objects and spaces
- Ability to implement small learning groups within the school to minimize the amount of movement and interactions between students
- Ability to quarantine of affected small groups, if necessary, rather than full quarantine or school closure
- The risks and limitations of bus transportation to and from school
- Infrastructure considerations (such as access to broadband services)

The USET Tribal Epidemiology Center (TEC) is charged under the Indian Health Care Improvement Act with providing epidemiologic and public health support to federally recognized Tribal Nations in the Nashville Area. The USET TEC is a designated public health authority.



The USET Tribal Epidemiology Center (TEC) has reviewed the latest evidence-based data from the CDC's *Reopening School Guidance* and other relevant publications, and considered the unique nature of Tribal communities and offers the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Schools are an essential part of our communities, as they provide safe, supportive learning environments for students, employ teachers and other staff and enable parents, guardians, and caregivers to work. However, evidence from past flu seasons and the transmission of other infectious diseases among school-aged children provides significant evidence in support of starting the 2020-2021 school via virtual learning, when possible.

Overcrowded school conditions may increase the spread of COVID-19 and inadequate staffing does not allow students to be placed into smaller groups to decrease the rate of exposure. Proper handwashing, hand sanitizing, and mask wearing protocols must be implemented and enforced throughout the day to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, should schools open for in-person learning. For Tribal Nations that re-open-either by choice, or because of circumstance (e.g., lack of broadband services), for in-person school should consider delaying until the appropriate safeguards are put into place.

Elders living in households with school-age children may have an increased risk of contracting the disease and an increased risk of severe complications or death should they fall ill. The USET TEC recommends that Tribal Nations also consider the risk to Tribal elders—and the potential negative cultural impacts in the event that elders are disproportionately affected.

For these reasons, the USET TEC strongly recommends at this time that schools remain in the virtual setting where possible until the incidence rate of COVID-19 decreases in the local area surrounding the school, AND there is evidence of a reduction in the rate of COVID-19 transmission among school children.

References

Dong Y, et al. Epi of COVID-19 among children in China. *Pediatrics*2020; 145(6).

Guthrie BL, Tordoff DM, Meisner J, Tolentino L et al., Summary of School Re-Opening Models and Implementation Approaches During the COVID 19 Pandemic. Pdf icon[18 Pages, 2 MB]external icon Global Health at the University of Washington. Published July 6, 2020. Accessed July 23, 2020.

Szablewski CM, Chang KT, Brown MM, et al. SARS-CoV-2 Transmission and Infection Among Attendees of an Overnight Camp — Georgia, June 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1023–1025. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6931e1>external icon.