



KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Superintendents' Webcast

SUMMARY

WEBCAST DATE: AUGUST 18, 2020

CONTENT SUMMARY PUBLISHED IN KENTUCKY TEACHER:

COVID-19 stats and reporting dominate Kentucky superintendents' webcast

By Jim Gaines – August 19, 2020

Kentucky's public health commissioner discussed COVID-19 case reporting and the latest statistics with the state's school superintendents during the Aug. 18 [Special Superintendents' Webcast](#).

Dr. Steven Stack, commissioner of the Kentucky Department for Public Health (DPH), addressed questions about the data and testing, which he said has changed greatly since June when the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and DPH released their flagship [Healthy at School](#) guidance in June.

He said he knows difficulties with data are frustrating for superintendents, but DPH is working hard on improving and automating the reporting system.

“We have come a long way. The data has gotten much better over time,” Stack said.

But he said there are “many, many reasons why collecting this data on which we all rely is difficult.”

Under normal circumstances labs only report positive results, not the total number of tests given, he said. When the reporting system was created, gathering all test results wasn't practical because that was before the advent of electronic reporting, Stack said. Data still arrives in a variety of formats and it's very labor-intensive for DPH personnel to enter them all into one database, he said.

Since positive COVID-19 tests may take several days to come in, those results don't line up with the number of tests given on a particular day. Also, people may not live or work in the county where they're tested, potentially skewing local results, Stack said.

The magnitude of this pandemic has prompted many places which previously didn't do disease testing, such as nursing homes, to begin doing so. While that has increased Kentucky's testing

capacity, it also means many places now processing tests are unfamiliar with reporting requirements and methods.

Stack said that COVID-19 cases in the United States are far higher than in other countries as a percentage of population, which makes controlling outbreaks and reopening schools much harder.

“You can do things when the disease is very rare, or uncommon, that you can’t do when it’s exploding all around you,” he said.

Kentucky’s “enormous accomplishment” was holding new cases at a plateau for three months, but numbers began climbing in early July. Following Gov. Andy Beshear’s announcement of new restrictions on Aug. 10, cases seem to have leveled off again – but at a rate three times higher than before, Stack said. If that rate doesn’t come down, he said it could easily get out of control, leading to a wave of deaths such as New York experienced last spring.

The [Healthy at School](#) guidance, predicated on June’s lower positivity rate, should be considered the minimum standard for the entire coming academic year, Stack said. If infections climb further, he said tighter restrictions will be needed.

Stack said a COVID-19 vaccine should not be expected this year. Even if one becomes available early in 2021, he said it still will be months before much of the population can be vaccinated.

Lt. Gov. Jacqueline Coleman said even the best school reopening plans, if done at the wrong time, will be unsuccessful. Other states, even ones which haven’t reopened schools yet, have hundreds or thousands of families in quarantine.

When schools close for outbreaks of other diseases like the flu, they don’t wait for children to start dying before shutting down, Coleman said. She also noted the long-term effects of COVID-19 on young people are still poorly understood but “very troublesome,” including lasting organ damage.

No current option for opening or delaying school is ideal, but districts will have to pick the best they can, Coleman said.

Small Group Guidance

KDE released [guidance](#) on Aug. 17 on allowing small groups of students back into school buildings for specific purposes such as evaluations, required hands-on work, counseling, therapy and tutoring.

Before deciding to reopen for small groups, school officials should think about whether they can accomplish the same goal virtually, said Kelly Foster, KDE associate commissioner in the Office of Continuous Improvement and Support. If it is necessary to bring students in, they must follow the Healthy at School guidance on temperature checks, social distancing, mask wearing, sanitization and contact tracing. No building can hold more than 15% of its usual student building capacity, and no room can have more than 10 people at once, including the teacher, Foster said.

Some services make in-person instruction necessary, especially for students that have Individualized Education Programs, said Gretta Hylton, KDE associate commissioner in the Office of Special Education and Early Learning. In planning for that, she said schools should

review the July 20 guidance on [exceptional learners and preschool students](#), which includes relevant information.

Admissions and release committees still are responsible for determining what services are necessary for a free, appropriate public education, Hylton said. Some of those must be in person, but if health risks are too great, school districts should plan to deliver compensatory education later.

Participation Tracking

Guidance on [tracking student participation](#) online in the Infinite Campus system also was released on Aug. 17. Schools are not required to collect attendance data this year, since most learning will be through non-traditional instruction (NTI), but they still must track daily participation, said Caryn Davidson, KDE academic program consultant in the Office of Teaching and Learning.

The update comes after a document on [daily participation and NTI](#) was released earlier this year, which led to questions on how to set up online courses and participation tracking, Davidson said.

Early Opening Consequences

Interim Commission of Education Kevin C. Brown addressed a question he's been asked repeatedly since Gov. Beshear recommended that schools delay opening for in-person classes until Sept. 28: What are the consequences for districts if they reopen before then?

Brown said he had calls from 20 of the state's 171 school districts over the previous four days, and repeated his earlier answer to all of them.

The "consequences" of going against Gov. Beshear's recommendation are those of public health – the likelihood of increased COVID-19 cases. That means districts which open early may have to shut down due to an outbreak, Brown said.

KDE officials would not show up to shut schools down.

The department is asking districts to follow the Healthy at School guidance, but KDE has neither approved nor disapproved any district reopening plans, he said.

Brown described all 20 phone calls as non-confrontational, and said the districts had good reasons for wanting to reopen. But the decisions lie in weighing one set of public health factors against another, he said.

Some districts he spoke to said they will continue examining the timing of their reopening schedule, or will offer hybrid learning with a choice of online or in-person classes, Brown said. But most of the 20 still were planning to open before Sept. 28.

Asked whether Gov. Beshear is likely to order schools to close, Brown said he couldn't speak for the governor, but the health situation changes daily. If districts choose to open before Sept. 28, they need to watch their local case counts closely and perhaps revisit their decision if the number of cases starts to increase, he said.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ADDRESSED DURING THE WEBCAST:

Agenda Item: COVID-19 Updates with the Kentucky Department for Public Health (DPH)

Presenters: Dr. Steven Stack, DPH commissioner

Dr. Connie White, DPH deputy commissioner

Emily Messerli, DPH immunization branch manager

Question: What is Dr. Stack's recommendation around athletics? The Kentucky High School Athletics Association (KHSAA) and the Board of Controls are making a recommendation on Thursday. Are they following the governor's recommendation?

Answer: DPH is relying on KHSAA to develop thoughtful guidelines. DPH provides guidance to those who lead their areas. KHSAA is supportive of the recommendations about public health. Several plans are being developed, allowing flexibility. They are committed to providing sports seasons, if possible, though the seasons will look different. Each sport is different and guidance for each is customized.

Question: Since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has said masks can be worn by children 2 years old and older, will KDE's guidance on students wearing masks change?

Answer: KDE guidance states the expectation for masks to be worn by students in first grade and older. It is OK for students over age 2 to wear masks and is encouraged as best practice. Adults should model mask wearing and help children understand the new normal. The expectation was set for first grade and up due to feedback from education partners and to mirror Kentucky's childcare guidelines.

Question: If there is a positive COVID-19 case, are districts expected to tell every household in the district or work with the local health department and follow contact tracing protocols?

Answer: Districts must work with the local health department so contact tracers can begin their work of contacting those who are at high-risk of exposure. Districts should notify families and communities when positive cases have been identified in a school.

Question: Does the higher rate of testing skew the infection rate data?

Answer: It could if testing were rapidly increased by a large percentage. Kentucky's testing rate has been fairly consistent, but the number of cases keeps rising.

Question: Do other states have these same issues with reporting regional metrics? They seem to be able to provide these. Are they not accurate?

Answer: It depends on how their laboratories are reporting data. Without an electronic data system reporting where each negative test occurred, Kentucky cannot accurately report county-level positivity rates.

Question: Is the DPH looking at a model like West Virginia regarding opening schools? While it may be too late to apply to reopening, it would help when determining intermittent closures.

Answer: The West Virginia model indicates a low statewide positivity rate, less than 5% to implement the model. We are trying to impose an objective framework onto a dynamic situation, so flexible human judgement is needed during decision-making by experienced educators and local health departments.

Question: If students have a medical exemption from wearing a mask, can districts require them to participate in virtual-only learning?

Answer: The school should communicate with the family and honor legitimate medical conditions that prevent masking. The first step would be to accommodate the student through social distancing instead of forcing the online option, though some parents may be amenable to online instruction. Each student's situation will be unique.

Question: When positive cases are reported by DPH for school communities, will individual schools be identified?

Answer: Possibly, by the number of positive cases identified in staff and students at each school. No identifying information would be reported. The reporting policy is currently under review with the Cabinet for Health and Family Services to ensure the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is not infringed upon, especially in small programs where any positive case could result in possible identification of individuals.

Question: Why is it recommended that every district in the state be closed when the range for daily COVID-19 cases varies significantly from 23% to 0.01%?

Answer: The virus is fluid and spreads so quickly and easily.

Question: Why is it the school's responsibility to announce public health notifications?

Answer: The school will have time to make an advance announcement before cases are reported on the state website. Districts may want to develop their own messaging before their communities check the website.

Question: Has the mortality rate of COVID-19 increased or is it still 0.026%?

Answer: Our death rate has not increased, that is usually seen in the data two weeks after positive cases. The death rate is not the only metric to consider, as there are hospitalizations, admittance into intensive care units and intubations. Additionally, long-term effects of this virus are still unknown. This virus attacks multiple organs in the body, not just the lungs. Many people dying from COVID-19 are dying from kidney or renal failure and long-term effects of the disease are of great concern. Using the death rate is a low bar for determining success.

Agenda Item: New KDE Guidance – Orientation and Targeted Services Guidance

Presenters: Kelly Foster, KDE associate commissioner, Office of Continuous Improvement and Support

Gretta Hylton, KDE associate commissioner, Office of Special Education and Early Learning

Robin Kinney, KDE associate commissioner, Office of Finance and Operations

Questions on this topic were addressed in the GoSoapBox form.

Agenda Item: New KDE Guidance – 2020-2021 Participation Tracking in Infinite Campus

Presenters: Caryn Davidson, KDE academic program consultant, Office of Teaching and Learning

Josh Whitlow, KDE academic program consultant, Office of Finance and Operations

Question: Is the expectation in Infinite Campus (IC) that kids who are completing a course by a digital provider be moved in and out of a course marked for digital learning provider if they start one way and change?

Answer: Yes, it is the expectation that IC reflects what is happening in school as much as possible. Self-paced courses created by a provider are quite different from other forms of virtual learning.

Agenda Item: General Question and Answer Session

Presenter: KDE leadership team

Question: What are the consequences of starting school before Sept. 28?

Answer: The consequences of resuming in-person classes before Sept. 28, against the recommendations of the governor and DPH, are consequences related to public health; an increase in the likelihood that districts will have more positive cases.

Question: How many school districts have been approved to begin in-person classes before Sept. 28?

Answer: Reopening plans were not submitted or approved by KDE, including start dates. KDE has conducted phone calls with districts who are choosing not to heed the governor's recommendation and all the calls have been positive and respectful. The purpose of the calls is to have a deeper discussion about the reasons for the governor's recommendation; the districts have their own, valid reasons for wanting to offer in-person instruction before Sept. 28. At the end of the calls, some districts have decided to revisit the data or change their re-opening plans, but many have decided to continue with their current plans. Many districts are reopening for in-person learning during the week of Aug. 24. KDE does not have a list, since districts are not required to submit their reopening plans. Through monitoring of district websites, it is estimated that 19 or 20 districts are not following the governor's recommendation to delay in-person classes until Sept. 28. Districts will be supported by KDE regardless of when classes resume, or the method of instruction chosen.

Question: Given the feedback from Mississippi and Dr. Stack's information, is there any consideration by the governor to order, rather than recommend, that schools close?

Answer: KDE cannot speak for the governor, but one of the primary difficulties is that circumstances are changing daily. That is why it is important for district leaders to continue to watch the governor's press briefings and stay updated. Local boards may have a different opinion in two weeks than they do today. It is always possible that recommendations or orders will be revisited if circumstances change.

Agenda Item: Adjournment

Presenter: Kevin C. Brown, KDE interim commissioner

Discussion:

Brown thanked everyone for the valuable discussion and their hard work on behalf of Kentucky's students.

The next superintendents' webcast is scheduled for Tuesday, Aug. 25, at 2 p.m. ET.