

July 16, 2020

Dear Indianapolis-Marion County School Leaders,

Our role at the Marion County Public Health Department is to protect the health, safety and well-being of this community. It means doing everything possible to prevent the spread of COVID-19, an infectious disease that can spread rapidly in a community.

We will continue to partner with school administrators and keep them informed in case we need to make rapid decisions to protect public health. We are closely monitoring data on a daily and weekly basis and will not hesitate to implement new recommendations if we see significant spread of the virus.

We are also taking into account guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), which makes clear that the decision of whether or not to open schools for in-person learning should be based on the circumstances of each community. The AAP says that closing schools has damaging effects on children's social development, emotional skills, mental health, and sometimes their nutrition and physical exercise options. According to the organization, school systems, "should start with a goal of having students physically present in school." This is especially important for students dealing with poverty and trauma.

The Marion County Public Health Department issued guidance for schools with recommendations on precautions and other measures that would help them to open and operate safely. This guidance was based on current COVID-19 activity in Marion County.

During the last week of April through the first week of May, Marion County experienced a peak of COVID-19 activity, reporting its highest number of new cases, positivity rate of new cases, emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and the rate of increase in reported deaths.

- Marion County's highest average of new COVID-19 cases was during this peak on May 5, 2020 with 204 cases per day based on a 7-day rolling average. After reviewing the number of COVID-19 cases from June 24-July 7, 2020, the number of new cases in Marion County went down by 4%.

Since July 7, Marion County went from an average of 55 cases per day up to 68 cases per day based on a 7-day rolling average through July 14, 2020.

- At the peak of the COVID-19 epidemic in Marion County, from the last week in April to the first week of May, data showed the positivity rate – the number of tests coming back positive from individuals being tested – at 32%. Tremendous progress has been made since that time.

The number of COVID-19 tests coming back positive in a day has trended downward significantly in the past couple of weeks to a rate of 4.5% on June 24. That rate has since started to increase and was 6.9% by July 7, and since then has plateaued at 7.4% this week.

- During June 24-July 7, visits to hospital emergency departments remained flat. Since July 7, emergency department visits has continued to be flat and decreased slightly this past weekend.
- Hospitalizations showed a decline of 6% during this same time period from June 24-July 7 and have remained flat since July 7.
- The rate of deaths in Marion County resulting from COVID-19 appears to have substantially declined in the past three weeks and remains flat since July 7.

This is an evolving infection. From a public health perspective, we will need to respond to where the COVID-19 virus goes in our community to ensure the safety of our students, staff, and faculty.

At this moment looking at our current data, we are optimistic about the probability of schools reopening in early August 2020. If the disease, however, substantially spreads within our community, we will need to postpone in person classes. Similarly, if we begin classes and the disease spreads, we will need to suspend in person classes.

Going forward, we will work incredibly close with the school systems to put health and safety first and share important data to help schools operate safely. Should you or your staff have any questions or concerns, please contact the Marion County Public Health Department Infectious Disease Program at 317-221-2117 or COVID-19SchoolInfo@marionhealth.org.

Sincerely,

Virginia A. Caine, M.D.

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Director and Chief Medical Officer