TO: RSAI Member Superintendents

FROM: Margaret Buckton, Legislative Advocate

DATE: August 19, 2020

RE: Update on Metrics, Data, Education Roundtable Conversations and Recent Opening School FAQ

**Metrics:** the media has recently reported some discrepancies in testing data impacting the positivity rate of COVID-19 tests in a county (one of the two metrics schools are required to use to inform decisions on return-to-learn models.) From yesterday’s Bleeding Heartland blog (source and link below):

“The Iowa Department of Public Health has erroneously recorded thousands of positive COVID-19 test results, distorting reported case numbers and positivity rates.

Rob Ramaekers, the lead epidemiologist for the department’s Surveillance Unit, acknowledged in an August 14 email that [Iowa’s coronavirus website](https://coronavirus.iowa.gov/pages/case-counts) has recorded some recent cases as occurring weeks or months in the past. According to Ramaekers, state officials are aware of the problem and working on a fix.

The backdating means that publicly available numbers underestimate the positivity rate for COVID-19 tests conducted over the past two weeks, a key metric for measuring community spread.”

The blog explains the discrepancy, assigning recent positive tests to an earlier month when the individual first tested negative, and not including antigen test results, both having the effect of lowering the 14-day positivity rate. The blog provides two examples, which show the magnitude of the discrepancies;

* Van Buren County, which due to not counting antigen tests, is underreporting positive tests; instead of reporting 83 cases and 2 deaths in the county, confirmed by Van Buren County Public Health, the Iowa Testing site is showing 42 cases and 1 death.
* Humboldt County, due to underreporting of some nursing home facilities as investigated by Sara Konrad Baranowski, who [reported for the Iowa Falls Times Citizen](http://www.timescitizen.com/kifg/state-problem-has-skewed-covid-data-for-months/article_0c7bb23a-e0c3-11ea-a2e1-83f7b4e03390.html) on August 17: “The date to which new cases are being assigned affects a county’s positivity rate for a specific period of time. For example, 137 Hardin County residents were tested for COVID-19 between Aug. 4 and 10. If 11 people had tested positive, as the state is reporting, the seven-day positivity rate is 8 percent. If 20 people had tested positive, as the county reported, the seven-day positivity rate would be 14.5 percent.”

If contacted by media as you are preparing to open school, we would suggest the following talking points:

* RSAI has suggested additional metrics be considered to help us make the best decisions for the safety of our staff and students. We were concerned about the 14-day testing percentage and 10% student absence as being too high or not representative of the incidence of COVID in a rural county, even before this data issue arose. This issue magnifies our concerns.
* We continue to work with our county public health department to keep an eye on the COVID-19 trends and number of positive cases in our county.
* We encourage Iowa Department of Public Health and the Governor to provide additional measures we can locally analyze, to help us make the right decision for our community, whether that’s in-person learning, a hybrid model or 100% virtual learning, to best educate our students during a global pandemic.

**Education Roundtable:** Gov. Reynolds’ Chief of Staff, Sara Craig, DE Dir. Ann Lebo and DPH Acting Dir., Kelly Garcia, convened a weekly Education Roundtable with broad representation of education association and public health groups to discuss key issues. We truly appreciate being included as part of this group and look forward to the continued conversation. At our first meeting Aug. 7, we collectively discussed the next round of DE guidance prior to its issuance. Some changes were made based on the groups’ feedback, including:

* Counting instructional time during a 48-hour closure while DE and DPH are working on approval of application to move to 100% virtual learning. If the district feels it’s prudent to close the school or district during that waiting period, there will be no requirement to make up the time.
* Including all COVID-related reasons for absenteeism in the count to get to 10% of students absent (illness, quarantine, and isolation.)
* Stated that applications to close an attendance enter or school district for those districts whose counties are not at the 15% positivity rate and 10% student absenteeism will be considered.
* The guidance specifically states, “Districts should work with state and local public health to determine the best course given situations locally.” It is unclear if this local collaboration and latitude applies to applications for 100% virtual learning when the district is below the metrics, as well as to those who wish to stay open who are above the metrics. We continue to encourage this consideration.

We shared several other concerns not yet addressed:

* Metrics too limiting: the positivity rate of testing in the last 14 days possibly exaggerates concern in rural counties for a variety of reasons. We requested another alternative metric (active cases per 10,000 population) and trend (decreasing for 14 consecutive days) in our comments to the executive branch. We also suggested a consideration of staff absence and staff capacity as rationale to switch to virtual learning based on the board’s decision. For example, rural schools may have bus drivers out due to need to quarantine, with no other way to get students to school. As of today’s writing, we have not heard of any additional metrics being considered.
* Timelines too restrictive: the two-week period of permission for 100% virtual and requiring 50% of instructional time must be in person for all grade levels and over a two-week period are both overly restrictive. This requirement excludes hybrid models that would allow socially distanced elementary with 100% virtual secondary students, or cohorts over several weeks (4 weeks in school, 4 weeks virtual) which were successful models to stop community spread in Singapore and Europe, most notably Denmark.
* Quarantine vs. Negative Test for confusion: the group discussed confusion regarding: 1) requiring 14-day quarantine for any exposed students, regardless of symptoms, 2) allowing exposed staff without symptoms to be classified as critical workforce and continue working while monitoring symptoms and 3) allowing staff or students who sought treatment for symptoms but tested negative to return if symptoms recede in fewer than 14 days. We would prefer all exposed, including staff, fill the quarantine period, (while using staff absence as justification for changing the learning model). The third condition we understand but it could be more clearly stated; an individual who seeks medical care based on symptoms, tests negative, and hasn’t been exposed to COVID may return to school based on the diagnosis (24 hours without fever, cough improving, etc., whatever the indicators are for the diagnosis.)

**Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund**: Gov. Reynolds’ announced, on Aug. 7, dedication of GEERS funding for internet connectivity including but not limited to hot spots, devices, and subsidies for internet access. Of the $26.2 million, $19.3 million will go to public and nonpublic K-12 schools based on DE survey results of family needs augmented by Census Tract data when necessary. See your district allocation here: <https://educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/CARES_Act_GEER_Allocations_Equitable_Shares.xlsx>

**Quick Links:**DE FAQ on Reopening and Public Health Frequently Asked Questions: <https://educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/2020-07-14ReopeningandPublicHealthFAQ.pdf>

COVID 14-day Positivity Rate for your School district: <https://coronavirus.iowa.gov/pages/percent-school-district-positive-analysis> page down to county or school district table– click on your district if you are in multiple counties

COVID Positive Cases per 100,000 population by county: <https://coronavirus.iowa.gov/pages/case-counts> again, page down and click on your county in the map to see county-wide statistics

## Bleeding Heartland Blog, “Iowa's COVID-19 website has backdated some cases for months” 8/17/2020 <https://www.bleedingheartland.com/2020/08/17/iowas-covid-19-website-has-backdated-some-cases-for-months/?fbclid=IwAR202lzemE54kMF53ClDq3Lj_NUcb9amYNzxNn45ufQq8wRCNrBgV2vvOKI>