



Date: August 5, 2020  
To: All Local Media  
From: Peter Schade, MPH, RS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **The Erie County Board of Health recommends virtual learning for all K-12 Erie County schools to start the 2020-2021 school year**

COVID-19 has a firm grip on Erie County. Since July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, Erie County has been designated by the Ohio Department of Health as a Red Alert Level 3 Public Health Emergency as defined by the [Ohio Public Health Advisory System](#). Level 3 indicates very high exposure and community spread and all in-person activities should be limited as much as possible. During the past 14 days, 148 laboratory-confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been identified in Erie County, which exceeds the "high incidence" category for COVID-19 cases, as defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. While Erie County ranks 32<sup>nd</sup> amongst Ohio counties for population, it has the 13<sup>th</sup> highest incidence of COVID-19 cases in Ohio. Erie County has experienced a sustained increase in new cases since July 1, and 81% of those cases are not in a congregate setting, indicating significant transmission in the broader community.

The Erie County Board of Health has identified a significant increase in the number of young people who are infected by the virus, and 21% of Erie County cases are in those under the age of 30. In Erie County, 229 students under 19 years of age and 23 adults associated with school buildings (e.g. teachers, coaches, administrators) have been placed on a mandatory 14-day quarantine at some time in the past five (5) months due to an exposure to a confirmed case of COVID-19. Of those 252 students and school staff members placed on a mandatory 14-day quarantine, 212 occurred just in the month of July.

These exposures occurred due to community spread outside of school, and the number would surely be higher had schools remained open. There is no indication from the data at this time that the number of new infections will decrease without the implementation of comprehensive infection prevention measures. The top priority for returning to school is the health and safety of students, staff, and families. Based on this information, the Erie County Board of Health **recommends** that all public and private Erie County school districts implement a plan for virtual education of students for the first academic quarter of the 2020-2021 school year, through approximately October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

In addition to the recommendation of implementing virtual education, the Erie County Board of Health **recommends** the school districts follow all current OHSA and Governor Dewine's orders related to sports activities. Since May 22<sup>nd</sup>, when the first non-contact sports practices were permitted to resume, Erie County epidemiologists have investigated COVID-19 cases impacting 16 school-sponsored sports teams in five (5) Erie County school districts.

COVID-19 cases were identified in an additional three (3) privately sponsored or traveling teams. In each of these incidents, multiple team members and coaches were required to quarantine for 14 days to prevent infecting others. The cases did not come from a single type of sport, but arose from groups of people coming together.

The Erie County Board of Health recognizes the challenges that virtual education present to school officials, students, and families and understands that there may be an initial need to meet with students to implement virtual education programs. During the first two weeks of the school year, school staff may meet with students in a hybridized structure if they are able to maintain appropriate social distancing of at least six (6) feet; and all staff and students are wearing facial coverings (except where exclusions apply). This time may be used to distribute virtual learning devices, training, and preparation for virtual learning. The time may also be used to meet with students who receive special education services and to provide those specialized services.

The Erie County Board of Health is monitoring local COVID-19 data and working closely with Erie County school districts and administrators to develop a plan for the safe education of Erie County students. The Erie County Board of Health recognizes the importance of in-person school and that schools play a critical role in supporting the whole child, not just their academic achievement. In addition to a structure for learning, schools provide a stable and secure environment for developing social skills and peer relationships, and providing social services. The Erie County Board of Health will continue to meet regularly with school administrators to review local data, and State and Federal guidance to determine when in-person classes could safely resume.

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