



ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

RISING ITASCA COUNTY COVID CASES SLOW AS AREA SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES
CAREFULLY WATCH

(Grand Rapids, Minn., **Oct. 22, 2020**) – Itasca County’s 14-day COVID-19 positive case rate has dropped over the past week, from 52.4 positive cases per 10,000 residents as of Oct. 12 to 46.5 as of Oct. 18, rates based on when specimens were collected (people were swabbed). Over the past seven days, 67 Itasca residents received positive diagnoses, compared to 115 over the previous seven days.

“Community members can take credit for this good news,” said Kelly Chandler, department manager for Itasca County Public Health. “Wearing masks and keeping six feet of distance works, as does avoiding crowds and gatherings. We know that these simple things can make the difference for our families, neighbors, schools, businesses, health care workers—all of us. It won’t be forever, but it will be needed for the months ahead.”

All area school superintendents issued a public plea on Oct. 8, seeking community support in reducing levels of COVID-19 so that districts, students and families have choice in learning options. In a joint letter, the superintendents wrote, “We want our kids in school as much as possible. We know of only one way that gives us the best chance at safely keeping our kids in school, sports, and activities.” The superintendents asked that residents follow the guidance of Minnesota Department of Health, such as avoiding crowds, keeping physical distance, wearing masks and washing hands.

Each district continually is looking at local conditions and considering local students and families in choosing the best paths forward for learning.

The Greenway school district will remain in a hybrid classroom setting for grades 5-12 and in an in-person setting for grades PK- 4. The in-person setting classrooms will be observing 50 percent classroom capacity ratings and strict social distancing for desks and activities.

“Greenway Independent School District believes the most effective and beneficial setting for all learners is an in-person learning environment,” said Superintendent David Pace. “We have been working hard to maintain these safe learning settings for our students and hope that our current local case rates begin to drop so we can return to an in-person K-12 learning model as soon as possible.”



According to Jeff Pesta, ISD317 superintendent, both Deer River High School and King Elementary will continue in its hybrid model. “Operating continuously as a hybrid has established stability at a stressful time,” said Pesta. “Time spent at school on an alternating day basis has provided the structure of recommended precautions with face coverings, spacing, personal hygiene and supervision. We are not aware of any school-based spread of the virus.

Bigfork and Grand Rapids schools also will continue in their current models. According to ISD318 Superintendent Matt Grose, “While the 14-day county case rates are still a concern for all of us, in Independent School District, schools less than one percent of students have tested positive and about two percent of staff. We know that not everyone who has been quarantined has gotten tested, so the actual number of COVID cases could be higher. However, this low number of cases in our schools shows us that we are doing a good job in schools of keeping our students and staff safe by adhering to health protocols like masking, distancing, cleaning, and reinforcing good hygiene.

“On October 20, ISD318 initiated a consultation with the Minnesota Department of Health and Itasca County Public Health. This was a proactive and voluntary consultation that we requested to ensure we are doing our best to keep students and staff safe. In addition to discussing county data, we also took a look at cases per zip code, which allows us to drill down to our district boundaries and see a case rate just for our district. After reviewing our county data, school data, and information about our models and plans, MDH concluded that our current approach was appropriate and reasonable and that we are able to continue with our hybrid model unless cases spike in our schools. MDH also reinforced our approach of looking at various data points and the nuances within them in making learning model decisions.”

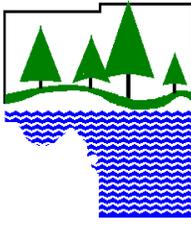
As of Oct. 5, Nashwauk-Keewatin schools (Independent School District 319), moved to their third phase of planning due to the amount of recent positive COVID cases. The district’s grades PreK - 6 now join grades 7-12 in hybrid learning.

According to superintendent and high school principal Brenda Spartz, “This pivot to N-K Phase 3 is not something we want to do, but must do because of the recent spread of COVID-19 in our local communities. Everyone can do their part in helping us stay in school by always wearing masks in public spaces, washing hands frequently, staying home if you have signs/symptoms of illness, and maintaining social distancing from others. Thank you for your continued Support.”

Students from throughout Itasca County have joined together in pleas to their communities to do what they can to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in their communities. Their video messages can be found at the [Mask Up Itasca YouTube channel](#).

“Together, we have the power to turn this around,” said Kamryn Klinefelter, volleyball player.

“Here’s what we’re asking,” said Grace Sevigny, hockey player. “Stay six feet apart, avoid crowds and gatherings, and wear a mask.”



“By doing these three things, you can make a difference,” according to Trent Johnson, football player.

Itasca County has created a local dashboard with current local data, including positive COVID cases by ZIP code. It is at: <https://www.co.itasca.mn.us/798/COVID-19-Coronavirus-Information>

Itasca residents with questions or concerns may leave them at the Itasca County COVID message line, with calls returned 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday – Friday. The Itasca COVID line number is 218-327-6784.

Helpful link:

Guidance on keeping self and others safe:

<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/prevention.html>

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Note to media: Itasca County Health Department will host 30-minute press briefings on Thursdays at 10:00 a.m. as needed. The next briefing will be Oct. 29. Recordings available. Contact anna.anttila@co.itasca.mn.us for more information.

Itasca County Public Health media contacts

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