



ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ITASCA AREA WORKING TO GET STUDENTS BACK TO CLASSROOMS

(Grand Rapids, Minn., **Dec. 4, 2020**) – Amid several weeks of troubling COVID-19 news for Itasca County, glimmers of hope also can be found.

“Many residents did their parts by not gathering over Thanksgiving,” said Kelly Chandler, Itasca County Public Health division manager. “These sacrifices mattered. In Itasca County, we have the power to change our numbers, get our schools back open, and sports going again. It’s going to take good decisions and monitoring conditions.

“Vaccines are coming. In the meantime, we’ve got to stay strong. Even symptoms that seem like just a cold or allergies mean you should stay home and consider getting tested. And if you are awaiting results of a COVID test or if you were in close contact with someone who tested positive, be sure to stay away from others. Wearing masks, keeping six-foot distance and not gathering. This is how we turn Itasca County’s rising numbers around.”

Itasca County’s situation remains serious, while also showing signs of improvement pending impacts of the Thanksgiving gatherings. The county’s 14-day rate per 10,000 residents (a key measure guiding schools) has dropped from a high of 129.9 positive COVID-19 cases two weeks ago to 101 as of Nov. 30.

As of 9:00 a.m. on Dec. 3, 207 additional Itasca County residents have tested positive for COVID-19 and 451 over the past 14 days, with 40 residents hospitalized and 11 of those in intensive care units.

One more Itasca area resident died this week due to COVID-19, raising the local death toll to 24.

“Locally, our hospital capacities are tight, although we have had some reprieve in the past week,” said Chandler. “But we are not out of the woods. We know it is hard to sacrifice our time with our families and friends, but our communities are depending on us.”

Schools have been a focal point of pandemic response, including those serving Itasca County students.

Greenway Public Schools – ISD316



Greenway Public Schools have employed distance learning for grades Kindergarten through 12 since Nov. 19, according to ISD316 Superintendent David Pace. “We did set an end date of Dec. 14 and are monitoring the number of students testing positive and staff available. We hope that, with good numbers, we’ll be able to bring back at least Kindergarten through fourth grade.”

The district has had significant swings in staff availability due to COVID, although currently experiencing a moderate six to seven percent of pandemic-related staff absences. “For a system that normally is highly regimented, schools are now in a constant state of change,” said Pace. “It’s difficult for teaching staff, support staff, parents and families. And a lot of the guidelines and standards also are shifting. We’re doing everything to get our students back into the building, because we know that in-person learning is best for the vast majority of our students.”

Greenway is providing meal pick-up services at Greenway High School and Marble sites, as well as providing childcare for a daily average of 60 children of Tier 1 essential workers. Students who need specific services, as well as those in career and technical classes, have had access to the schools during their reset.

Deer River Public Schools – ISD317

Deer River schools began the year using a hybrid model aimed at in-person occupancy of 50 percent or lower to prevent COVID spread. “I’m optimistic that we can continue,” said Superintendent Dr. Jeff Pesta. “We haven’t had any specific surge that impacted us throughout the school year and are optimistic that we can continue in this mode,” he said.

Deer River has expanded instructional and technology support via learning hubs throughout the district, as well as expanded food supports funded by grants. The district also hired additional full-time substitute teachers to meet rapidly changing needs.

Nashwauk-Keewatin Schools – ISD319

Like Greenway, Nashwauk-Keewatin schools started the year in-person, but transitioned to a hybrid model in October. On Nov. 13, the district instituted a reset, going to online-only learning for all grades in an attempt to recover from a surge of quarantines and absences among staff and students. The district is especially susceptible given a shortage of substitute teachers and parent teachers.

“We have hopes of bringing back at least some grades into a hybrid model on Dec. 14 based on how things look in the next several days,” said Superintendent and High School Principal Brenda Spartz. “Parents and students can expect to hear from us soon what the rest of December and winter break will look like.

“The flexibility of our staff and our families shown over the past nine months is incredible, everything we have asked people to do and how they’ve responded. As school leaders, we



know how these decisions impact families. But hard decisions have to be made right now, and we just appreciate everyone supporting the schools and showing flexibility.”

Nashwauk-Keewatin offers pick-up meals Monday, Wednesday and Friday as well as childcare for Tier 1 essential employees throughout the week. Special education students are supported in-person on a staggered basis, depending on needs of the student. Career and technical education programs also are accessing the school on a staggered schedule. Students with any connectivity or internet issues are encouraged to contact either of the district’s offices for support.

Bigfork and Grand Rapids Public Schools – ISD318

In a distance learning reset originally planned through Dec. 4, Bigfork and Grand Rapids schools have extended distance learning until at least Dec. 11, with final plans for the near future depending on data. ISD318 has seen 186 cases among students and staff since the beginning of school, with 77 in the past 12 days. When the decision was made to implement temporary distance learning, essentially a reset, 15 to 20 percent of the district’s staff were unavailable due to COVID. To meet staffing challenges, the district hired several full-time substitutes that are available each day.

“The driver is about being able to staff our buildings right now,” said Superintendent Matt Grose. “Our ability to put teachers in front of kids, ESPs and paras, the ability to drive buses, serve food. One of the ways our communities can support us is to sign up to be subs, guest teachers and guest ESPs.

“The reset so far has helped things settle down a bit and if the trend continues, we can start pulling kids back into school. We hope to get back to normal as soon as we can.”

ISD318 currently provides childcare to 160 children, in partnership with the Boys and Girls Club, as well as meals for pick-up.

Bug O Nay Ge Shig School – Leech Lake

Bug O Nay Ge Shig started the school year with a model that was predominantly characterized by distance learning, although small groups of students were brought into the school each morning and afternoon for academic tutoring, technology tutoring, mental health services, or special education services. The school operated this way until Nov. 30, when the model was switched to full distance learning for all students. The School Board recently decided to continue to operate this way until Jan. 25, which is the start of second semester. The current surge in positive COVID-19 cases, combined with the anticipated increase over the holiday season, led to this decision, and the school hopes cases will subside at the same time a vaccine becomes more available for community members, making groups of students in the building later this winter safe for everyone.



Bug O Nay Ge Shig delivers food to every household twice weekly and continues to invite students or families to the school for targeted services on an as needed basis. “Bug O Nay Ge Shig continues to work to strike a balance between safety and learning, which is a challenge unique to this school year,” said Dan McKeon, school director. “We will continue to look for the first moment when it becomes safe to have all of our students back in the building, learning about and celebrating Ojibwe language and culture.”

Northern Lights Community School - Warba

Northern Lights Community School is a small public charter school (under 100 students) serving students in four counties (Itasca, St. Louis, Cass, Aitkin). Due to the fact that it draws from a wide geographical area, and because of capacity limits placed on transportation, the NLCS school board decided to start the year in distance Learning with the idea that they would make plans to transition to a hybrid model once they got a better feel for getting our students to a from school safely. Unfortunately, the county infection rates have only been going up since we started in August and we have not been able to bring more students in other than a few students who are receiving Special Education services.

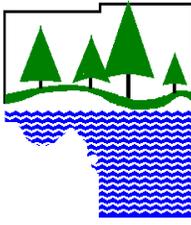
NCIS students all received brand new Chromebooks at the start of the year and we are currently paying for internet service for about 20 households thanks to the CARES Act funds received. NLCS students are taking live classes hourly during the day via Zoom with a few working asynchronously.

Thanks to support from AEOA by providing buses and drivers, and Second Harvest Food Shelf by providing supplemental food, NLCS is delivering meals to students and their families weekly.

“We want nothing more than this to be over and to get our students and staff back in the building where they belong,” said Mike Hamernick, NCIS director. “For the time being, we are making due with what we have and doing the best we can to support our students and their families in any way we can. Providing a quality education is our priority, but we recognize there is so much more support we can give beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic. Right now, we're doing whatever we can to keep our kids and their families safe and healthy until we can return to business as usual. We very much appreciate the community help we have received during these difficult times. This has truly been a group effort and many of our community partners have gone above and beyond for us.”

From the perspectives of area youth

“Even in these challenging times, we know that hope exists in our community and we can grow it,” said Kim Geislinger of Ross Resources and coordinator for the Itasca Family Services Cooperative. Among her many community roles, Geislinger is part of a community project raising up local youth voices in a series of videos that will begin airing across social media this week. The four videos focus on key elements of hope – happiness, opportunity, possibility and



empathy. The first of the series, Happiness, may be found online at <https://youtu.be/LEAJozGMvT0>.

“We are so thankful for the young people who were willing to share their hopefulness,” said Geislinger. “We want to share these messages of hope with everyone who is working so hard to keep our communities strong.”

Testing and local information

For those seeking testing, call ahead to Essentia Deer River, Scenic Rivers and Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital for details. Also, state-provided tests are available through the National Guard Armory in Hibbing (<https://www.primarybio.com/r/hibbing>) and an at-home test ordered online (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/testsites/athome.html>).

If you are waiting for COVID test results, stay home. If you experience even mild symptoms that resemble a cold or allergies, stay home and seek testing. If you have a positive test, your household members also need to quarantine for 14 days from last exposure.

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. Current local data and information also can be found at the county’s website here: <https://www.co.itasca.mn.us/798/COVID-19-Coronavirus-Information>

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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 scheduled briefing will be Dec. 17, with updates from area health care providers. Contact anna.anttila@co.itasca.mn.us for more information.

Itasca County Public Health media contacts

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