

COVID-19 Talking Points for Schools and Higher Education

One Year Later: We have seen many successes as a state with COVID-19 over the last year.

- ❖ Return to normal activities.
- ❖ Learned successful COVID-19 mitigation measures (e.g. masking and physical distancing).
- ❖ Testing is readily available to anyone with symptoms.
- ❖ COVID-19 vaccination is available for persons 12 years and older.

We have seen success with COVID-19 vaccination efforts among persons 50 years and older, but we still have large pockets of unprotected people less than 50 years of age now bearing the burden of COVID-19 infections. As of Jun 30, 2021, an estimated 38% of persons 12–49 years of age have received one dose of COVID-19 vaccination compared to an estimated 75% of persons 65+ years who are fully vaccinated. Nationally and in Oklahoma we are seeing an increasing number of infections among this unprotected group along with increasing hospitalizations and deaths. Young adults, school aged-children, and their parents are among this unprotected group, so it is important to consider that when making plans for the upcoming school year.

Unprotected pockets of the population allow for COVID-19 transmission. Transmission is an opportunity for SARS-CoV-2 (virus that causes COVID-19) to mutate and create new variants. Since the emergence of Delta variant in Oklahoma, there has been a sharp increase in percentage of cases infected with the Delta variant (April 2021 = 9%; May 2021 = 13%; June 2021 = 68%). It is more transmissible (possibly 50% higher) and more severe than previous COVID-19 strains seen thus far. FDA authorized COVID-19 vaccines have demonstrated protection against all variants identified thus far, including Delta variant. COVID-19 vaccination is the most important tool Oklahomans have to maintain normalcy in everyday life, including in-person learning in schools.

Data on COVID-19 Cases and Vaccinations Among School-aged Children as of June 30, 2021

Vaccination:

- 14% of children 12 – 17 years of age are fully vaccinated and 20% have received at least one dose of vaccine. No child less than 12 years of age is age-eligible for vaccination yet.
- If COVID-19 vaccination coverage among children 12 – 17 years of age does not rapidly improve, the majority of students in the school setting will be unprotected from COVID-19 infection.

Cases:

- Comparing Jul–Oct 2020 (pre-vaccination) to Mar–Jun 2021 (post-vaccination), there is an increase in infections among all age groups younger than 18 years of age in 2021.
- Comparing the same timeframe, we are also seeing a statistically significant increase in proportion of hospitalizations among all age groups in 2021. This may represent an overall increase in disease severity due to changes in the predominant circulating strains of COVID-19 during these timeframes.
- For example, the proportion of pediatric cases (0 – 17 years old) requiring hospitalization increased from 1.21% during the 2020 timeframe to 2.66% during the 2021 (120% increase).
- As vaccination coverage increases for previously at-risk populations and new variants increase risk of transmission, the disease burden and severity has increased in younger age groups, including school age children.

Scientific Evidence Supporting Multilayered Prevention Strategies in Schools

- Significant secondary transmission of SARS-CoV-2 infection occurs in school settings when prevention strategies are not implemented or followed.³⁶
- The majority of community-acquired cases brought into a school setting result in limited spread inside schools, if comprehensive prevention strategies are in place.^{39,42,53,5}
- When [prevention strategies](#) – especially mask use and physical distancing – are consistently and correctly used, the risk of transmission in the school environment is decreased.⁵⁰