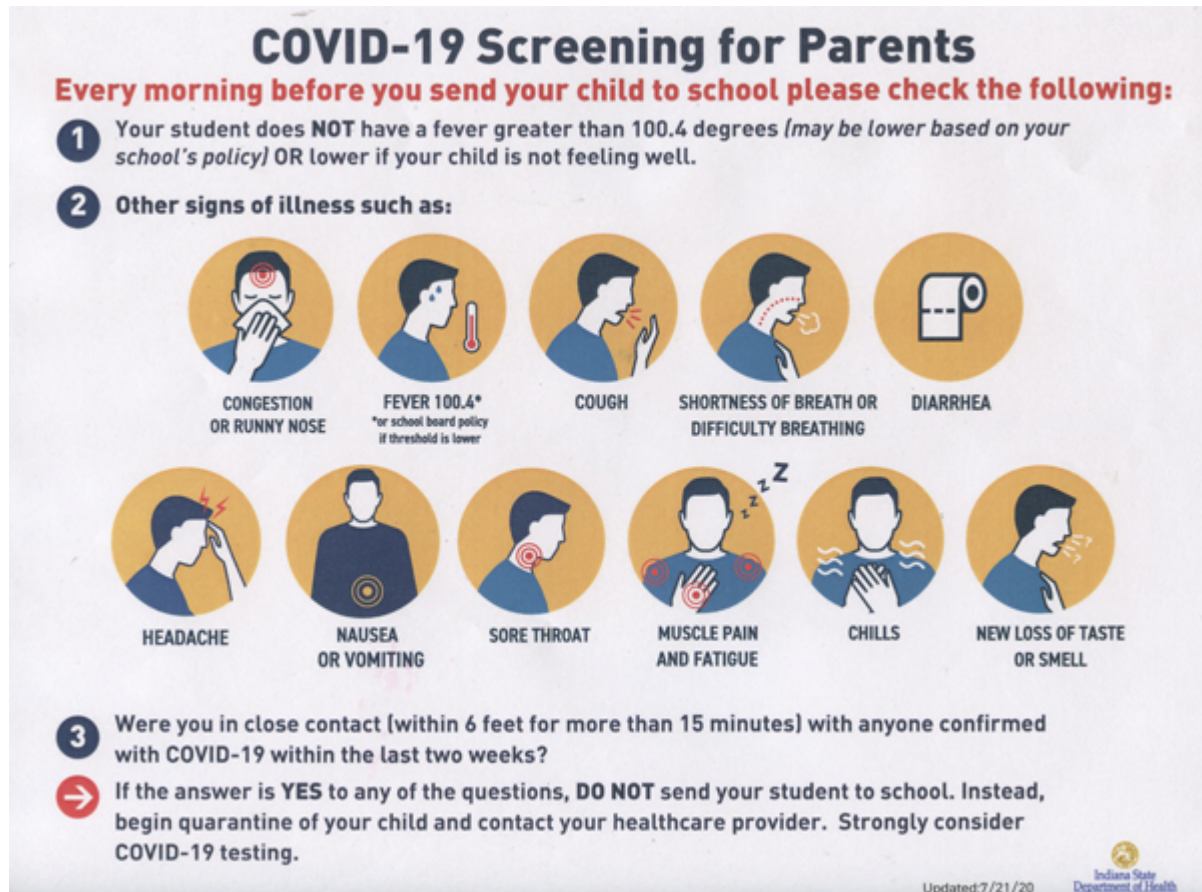


WCS Works With KCHD On Reopening Plans

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There's rumors of what schools reopening will be like during the coronavirus pandemic, and then there's the plans that have been vetted through the Kosciusko County Health Department.

Warsaw Community Schools has its plans posted on its website at warsawschools.org, but if that's not enough help, school officials invite parents to contact and work with them.

Friday afternoon, WCS Superintendent Dr. David Hoffert, Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education Dr. David Robertson and Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education Dani Barkey sat down for an hour-long interview about the school corporation's reopening plans.

Hoffert said they started working with the local health department back in February.

"That was when we reached out to them. We started putting information out to our parents on handwashing, general hygiene, what are symptoms and signs and realizing really quickly even the symptoms and signs from Feb. 19 looks very different than they do today," Hoffert said.

He said as the information about the virus and pandemic have evolved, so, too, have the guidelines and plans.

"Many people say that if we knew what we know now, probably the plan even back in the spring would

have been different statewide, would have been different with our schools and how we handle things. So it's that constant gaining of knowledge," Hoffert said.

He said WCS consulted with the health department before it even shut the schools March 13. "They became a thought partner and a collaborative partner from day No. 1."

Hoffert pointed out that WCS has a lot of expertise on its staff, a head nurse and nurses in each building, but it doesn't have the medical expertise when it comes to things like infectious diseases. Without the health department's consultation, he said they're flying blind.

"When we turn on the news, we see a lot of things of what's going on in Indianapolis, what's going on in Texas, what's going on in Arizona or New York. But the reality is, what we need to really be focusing on is what is our transmission rate here in Warsaw? What are our health risks and what are the health standards of protocols that need to be put in place inside of the guardrails of what the state has given us, here really at the local level? And things change really quickly," Hoffert said.

Remote Learning

Students can attend school for 2020-21 either physically or remotely. However, the deadline for students to be signed up for remote learning this upcoming school year is 5 p.m. Monday.

"The reason we're doing that is because we need to place teachers in the right place to be able to do that," Hoffert said.

Barkey spent the majority of her day Friday with parents who were considering the distance learning.

"One of the things we've said with our digital option is, we are not going to promise families that the digital option is as good as physical because we believe that the best place for kids is with teachers, and it's a great place to be," Barkey said. "We're going to try to give them a great option, but we can't replicate the in-class experience."

Hoffert said sometimes there are things that just have to be hands-on: going down into a creek with STEM education or machining engineering wakeboards and snowboards.

"Now, when we talk about the other classes, again it is a very, very quality option that the parents are going to be offered at the high school level, it's through APEX; at the middle school, it'll be a combination between APEX and a Warsaw teacher; at the elementary school, it will be a Warsaw teacher, as well, that will be working with that grade level. Again, these are all master teachers that are going to care about kids," Hoffert said.

Some of the high school dual credit courses may not be able to be offered virtually.

Masks

On July 15, it looked like masks would only be "recommended" for schools. This Wednesday, Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb announced he would issue a mask mandate, effective Monday, July 27, including for students in grades 3 and up at schools. Students need masks in buses, hallways, high-traffic areas.

"Pretty much, anytime that in the classroom you can't be within 3 to 6 foot distance, and that's what (Holcomb's) considering for the desks – 3 to 6 foot social distance," Hoffert said. "If you're working in small groups, if a teacher can't be farther than 6 feet away, the teacher needs to be wearing a mask, as

well. And then you don't have to wear a mask if you're doing strenuous activity." An example of "strenuous activity" would be kids playing soccer out at recess.

Without masks, people should not be within 6 feet of each other for more than 15 continuous minutes.

"The health department will tell you that the masks are a deterrent but they are not a fail safe inside of it," Hoffert said. Contained areas are more susceptible to the transmission of COVID-19, which is why families are being encouraged this year to not carpool.

Extracurricular

The Indiana High School Athletic Association has recommended schools do not open up their lockerrooms, especially in the first phase of athletics, Hoffert said.

"And the reason why is because lockerrooms are a contained area and a lot of times you're sitting there, getting ready, and it's an easier place for" the coronavirus to saturate.

To change, participants can bring a backpack with their clothes in them and make it a quick in and out.

"If you look at the way our football team, and Coach Curtis has said this from Day No. 1, he said, 'Look, if we want to have a football season, that means we've got to do things right. And if we're doing them right, we're protecting each other,'" Hoffert said.

When the football team practices, they're working in pods and inside of those pods, the players are not within 6 feet of each other unless it's very quick. Other sports have similar practice set-ups.

While the marching band season was cancelled statewide, Hoffert said WCS is still working on the music classes, choir and band because those can be "high-transmission areas."

"Extracurriculars is probably the place that has to have the tightest safeguards of any area," Hoffert said. "In the classroom, things are easy to monitor. When we're dealing with extracurriculars and how kids are coming, going, leaving, being next to each other, even though they are in open areas, it is probably one of the most pretentious and watched areas that we have to have the rules and stick by those rules."

Areas Of Expertise

Barkey said WCS is engaging all the experts that are available. "Because each context is different. The art room is different at Edgewood when compared to Lakeview. So we're getting those experts together and giving them our guidelines of what we think and then they get to think through their classmate context to make sure they have thought of all the different areas and thinking through of what we need to do to make that safe," she said.

Robertson said WCS has 11 different school sites. "So we have our districtwide guidelines on things, so principals are working with teachers on looking at the specifics. Each elementary school is going to need to figure out recess," he said, but it may look different school to school.

Summer school has helped the school district figure out the specifics, Barkey said. The secondary summer school program has just finished up and the elementary program is underway. As they've learned things, that information has helped revise and tighten the guidelines for the district and individual schools.

Hoffert said, "In all these areas, as we create the guidelines, then what we do is we send them to the health department and have them review. Before we ever came out with even our beginning opening guidelines, (Kosciusko Public Health Officer) Dr. (William) Remington and (Communicable Disease Nurse) Teresa (Reed) both scoured through them."

Remington and Reed could not be at Friday's interview, but Remington provided the following statement: "The Kosciusko County Health Department has had extensive communication with schools, including Warsaw Community Schools, as they have worked on their reopening plans. We are confident in their commitment to carefully provide classroom instruction and extracurricular activities during these challenging times with the COVID-19 pandemic. Each school district has spent many hours of rolling up sleeves, digging into the guidance and working out the myriad of details. Their plans fit well into the IDOE and ISDH framework. Every school system knows their constituency the best, and each school system will have a unique application within that statewide framework. All of this will need to be nimble. What we will know and understand in six weeks will be different than what we know and understand today. This pandemic is predictably unpredictable. It will take a village of support as we reopen schools. Support, encourage and offer constructive feedback to your schools. It is very important that we give it a shot."

Contact Tracing

The local health department is going to play an important part in contact tracing when schools reopen, Hoffert said.

"As we have students that do test positive, one of the things is that the state does their contact tracing and then here locally, we do it as well," Hoffert said. "So we're going to have some questions of who has been within that 6 foot of 15 continuous minutes and then how do we track those students down? And how do we make sure we're following the protocols that come from the State Department of Health of who would have to quarantine, who wouldn't have to quarantine, what does that quarantine look like? And that's where it's really important of what are some of those specifics inside that protocol that we put together with our staff?"

With about 7,000 at all of WCS's schools, Hoffert said it will be a very big task.

Referring to Remington's comment about it taking a village to reopen schools, Hoffert said, "The reality is, it is going to take a village because the No. 1 screening tool that we have is in the home."

The biggest thing for parents will be taking a look at temperatures for kids because WCS can't take every kid's temperature as they walk into the schools.

"But, you know what, if a student is feeling sick, if a staff member is feeling sick, this is not the year to come to school and bust your way through," Hoffert said.

School Supplies

For a "normal" school year, parents are asked to provide supplies for their child like glue, crayons and tissue paper.

"No. 1, the school has done a wonderful job. (Director of Maintenance) Jim LeMasters has done excellent, working with his department – maintenance and custodial – to make sure that we have the needed PPE equipment," Hoffert said. "We have masks, both cloth and disposable masks. We have hand

sanitizer for every classroom and every high-traffic area. We have face shields that have been ordered for every teacher and every sports staff employee.”

He said they’ve been moving heavy furniture out of classrooms to provide more space in the classes.

“We have electrostatic sprayers in every one of our buildings,” Hoffert said. Robertson said LeMasters started ordering them early and WCS is well stocked with them.

Hoffert said WCS has Clorox wipes. In the last couple of weeks, stores have been able to have masks, hand sanitizer and other items.

“We did add hand sanitizer and masks to the class supply list. Those are out at stores right now and each school website has (the list),” Robertson said. He said parents should make sure their children’s masks fit. “We have three different sizes of masks if students come in without them.”

Hoffert said kids are using masks to reflect their own personality. “If those are calming factors for kids, we want that,” he said. He said churches and United Way have been great in helping provide face masks and other items.

Politics Of Disease

The hardest part of dealing with the pandemic and reopening schools, Hoffert acknowledged, is the politics going around.

“Because when specific issues become party driven, or philosophical driven, we know that there are specific issues where there will always be a subsection that will be upset. And we realize that. Many times that doesn’t mean they’re upset at the schools. It means that, again, there are some social norms that have been changed,” he said.

WCS will continue to serve its community to the best of its ability, he said, with safety the No. 1 priority.