

First, I want to thank the *Vindicator* for allowing me to share with you about our triumphs and challenges as we work diligently to navigate this pandemic to the best of our ability. I hope this article will help you feel better informed, able to empathize, and achieve a sense of comfort as you read about our ongoing efforts to provide a safe experience for all.

I have been in education for over 30 years and I have never dealt with challenges like we see each day during the pandemic. Some of my experiences include closing buildings and implementing full-day kindergarten. These decisions were often political and at times split communities, but there was always a “light at the end of the tunnel” and we knew the vision. To use a metaphor, the “tunnel” during the pandemic continues to move each day. It is hard to travel toward our vision when the “tunnel” to get there is constantly moving. ***While in our district we continue to stay positive and share our passion for our students***, I see stress and anxiety created by the many different facets of this pandemic and the things asked of schools.

As educators, we have been confronted with a list of new responsibilities to keep our community safe. It feels that our parents and communities have strong views that seem to be polarized on wearing masks and social distancing. COVID-19 has brought much frustration as this passion for youth has been overshadowed as our educators approach burn-out. I ask for continued patience and grace during this new era of learning. Each staff member is working as a team member providing 110% each day trying to get through that moving “tunnel” and support each student’s learning while keeping them safe.

USD #338 continues and will continue to try and keep our students in the building and make sure that the environment provides safety within our powers. As the year progresses, the district will mostly likely be faced with some student/staff quarantines and positive cases. We will continue to learn from each of these experiences and improve our practices as we focus on keeping our students in our buildings.

At this time, I would like to share some information that might help you better understand our policies and procedures moving forward. I hope to provide glimpse of how the current Kansas Department of Health and Environment and Jefferson County Health Department guidelines impact our district.

- If a person tests positive they are automatically ISOLATED for 10 days. To determine exposure to this person the health department will determine the first day of symptoms and look back 48 hours. This is the date that contact tracing begins.
- If a person is exposed to a person who has tested positive, they are QUARANTINED for 14 days from the day they were exposed. There is no way to get out of the quarantine as the incubation period for the virus is 14 days. If this is in a person’s household and another household member tests positive during the quarantine period, the quarantine period starts over for any of those who have not had the virus. We often do not get test results back immediately. Because of this, we often are 7 days into what is the 14 day quarantine period before a quarantine begins.
- I have been asked what procedures take place when putting a staff member or student into quarantine or isolation. First, the district does not have the authority to officially order a quarantine or isolation. Only the Jefferson County Health Department can issue an official order which puts a staff member or student into quarantine.

- When a student or staff member lives in Jefferson County, which is part of our school system, and tests positive, we will get a call from the Jefferson County Health Department starting the contact tracing process.
- For students and staff in other counties, we may get notified by the individual who is being isolated or put in quarantine.
- As a district we have collected data such as bus seating charts, classroom seating charts, sport rosters, practice logs, and many other documents that provide us with the location of students throughout a school day.
- The administrative team will then work with staff to review and analyze who was in direct contact with the positive person during the infectious period using our location data. Any person that has been closer than 6 feet for 10 minutes or longer is put on a list that is sent to Jefferson County Health Department. This is whether they are masked or not. If the infectious person was an athlete then the entire team is listed on the possible direct contact list along with the coaches. District practice is to then contact any parent that may be getting a call from Jefferson County Health Department and send the students or adults home until we have a confirmation that they will not go into isolation or quarantine or a have a return to our system date because they have been put in isolation or quarantine.

As a district we try very hard to maintain social distancing, however, there are some areas and classrooms within our district where social distancing is not possible due to the numbers of students and the square footage within the area. Some examples are students being transported on a bus, as well as lunch seating. In these areas we have worked hard to put students in the same space or cohorts so that multiple students are not exposed if there is an identified positive test. During our contact tracing, this has proven effective as we have provided a smaller list of possible exposures to the Jefferson County Health Department because of this protocol.

Parents have asked, “What if our students don’t wear mask in the classroom?” This would increase the numbers of students who would have to be quarantined in the classroom. “What if we are not 6 feet apart in the areas that we are able to?” This would also increase the numbers of students who would be quarantined. While it may be frustrating and seem like our practices are not working, these two practices have kept our quarantine numbers lower than they could have been. The challenge we are currently facing as a district is that the two student positive tests were associated with two different sport teams, putting a large number of staff and students in quarantine. The number of staff created a situation where we didn’t have enough licensed personnel to cover classrooms.

USD 338 takes the safety of our students very seriously. Finally, I am asking that we all find ways to show each other respect. We all have a right to our own opinion, yet we can also be kind and respectful of each other. With that being said, when on school property, all Kansas Department of Health and Environment guidelines will be followed so that we can continue keeping our students learning on the USD 338 campus.

Dr. Hanzlicek, USD #338 Valley Falls Superintendent

