

Jackson County School District

Community Update – November 6, 2020

Superintendent: Dr. John D. Strycker

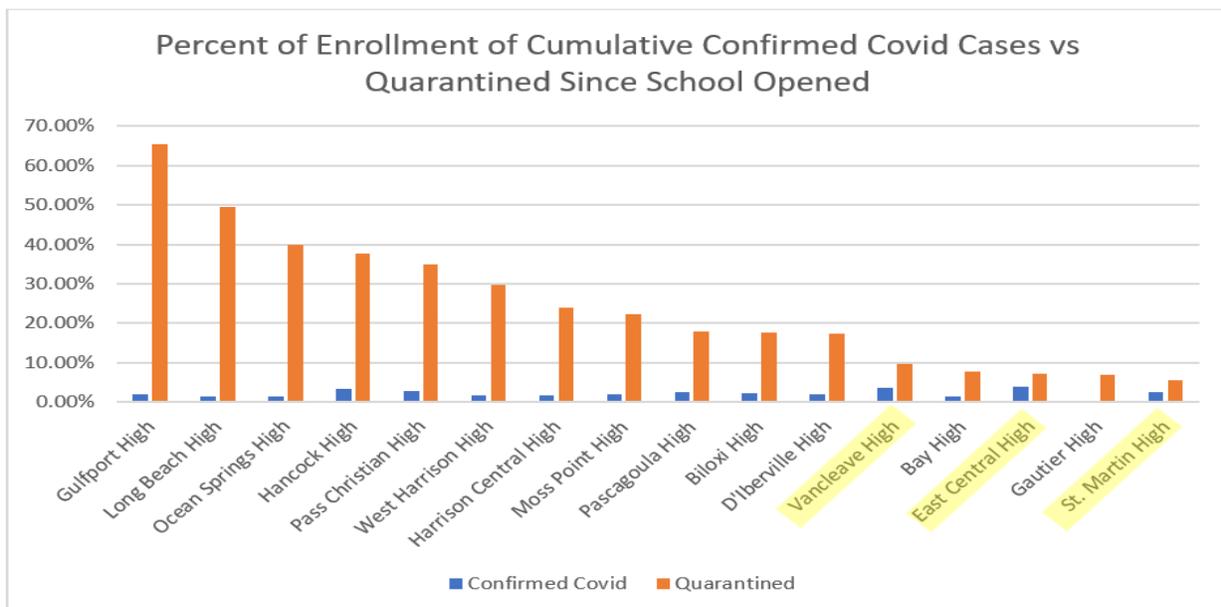


Mandatory Quarantine of Healthy Students – Is It the Right Decision?

Based on data, Jackson County School District says no.

Amidst the events of COVID-19, our school district community has moved forward as normal as possible. This past month alone, I have ridden in a homecoming parade that was well attended by our school community, watched our state cross country champion and state record-holder Christian Balcer compete, and experienced pride in our Vancleave Girls Volleyball team who won their 4th straight state championship. However, I most enjoyed my daily classroom visits to each Jackson County School District classroom where solid, fundamental learning was taking place. It was so good to see our students in the classroom with their teachers, coaches, and fellow classmates, making lifelong memories together during a special time of life – their childhood.

From the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, returning Jackson County School District students to a traditional, normal-as-possible, safe school setting has been our top priority. Our district has received and analyzed daily and weekly COVID-19 data from a variety of sources, including local medical agencies, the Mississippi Department of Health, and our own schools, and has used this data to drive our decision making. **During this analysis, we observed that positive COVID-19 cases amongst our students in JCSD have never exceeded a half of one percent at any one time.** In fact, the number of students out of school at any given time with COVID-19 was usually around a **quarter of one percent – even with limited quarantine practices!**

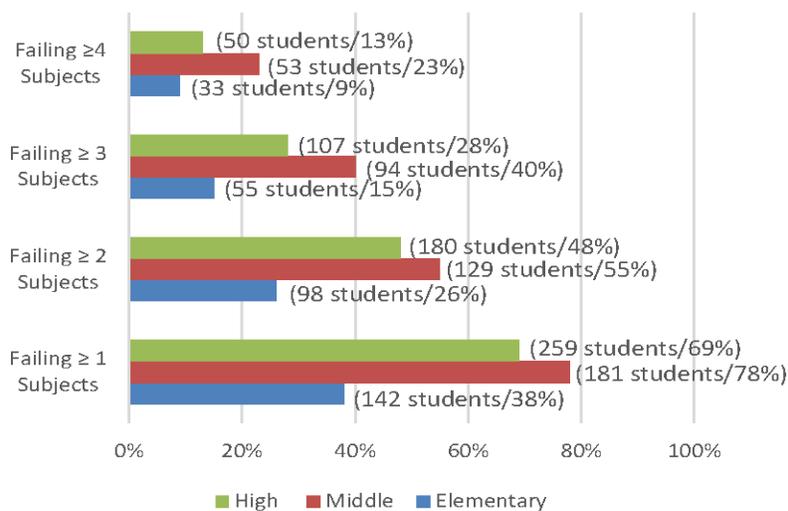


*Data Source for Graph: Data reported to Mississippi Department of Health by each school district through October 23, 2020.

District and school level administrators have met weekly since March 2020 to discuss safe educational opportunities for students and have developed and implemented a return-to-school plan different from most, while maintaining a commitment to follow all federal, state, and local mandates, including Governor Reeves’ mask ordinance for schools. **Unlike many local school districts’ policies, one primary difference in JCSD’s COVID-19 plan from other area schools is offering appropriate parental choice regarding the practice of quarantining healthy students during an outbreak.** For example, when our district experienced an outbreak at one of our attendance centers, we informed the parents of the exposed students and gave the parents the option to either quarantine their child(ren) or continue to send them to school. Overwhelmingly, the parents chose to send their child(ren) to school.

The outcome of this parental choice is more healthy children remaining inside the classrooms where they can continue their in-person education without disrupting their lives and their learning. Some may believe that students learn as well virtually as students who remain in the classroom; however, we have discovered from first quarter data that in-class learning is more effective than its virtual alternative, as illustrated in the chart below. Briley Richmond, an 8th grade English teacher at St. Martin Middle School, expressed his concern for his virtual students to the JCSD Board of Education by claiming, “Over the past four weeks, I have had ten students return from virtual learning. Of those ten students, all ten are behind when compared to those who have been in my classroom.”

Virtual Learning Students Failing Subjects by School Level at JCSD



*Data Source for Graph: Jackson County School District Student Information System.

In addition, equitable learning becomes an issue with students in the virtual setting due to a lack of direct, teacher-student interaction and the ability to provide optimal services to those who need a more personalized, engaging level of instruction. While the CARES Act has provided funding for schools to purchase adequate technology for students, many still lack internet access at home as well as appropriate supervision to complete required assignments. In-person education benefits students by offering more teacher-to-student time, fewer distractions, deeper connections being made to the subject matter, and higher assignment completion rates than online learning, particularly with students who live in poverty.

The concern does not simply stop at academics. Dr. Michael Cunningham expressed that the psychological damage that virtual learners face far outweighs the potential negative effects that COVID-19 could present

to the small percent of school-aged students nationally (7.1% as reported by the CDC in October 2020) who have contracted the virus since March 2020. Adolescent psychologist Dr. Lisa Damour noted, “Teenagers are in a developmental space where it is critically important that they have regular contact with their peers and are able to develop close and ongoing relationships with adults outside the home, such as their teachers, their coaches, and their advisors.” Many parents also believe that remote learning is causing their children to suffer emotionally and socially. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration highlighted that abuse is on the rise since the outbreak, with more children at home and stressed-out parents trying to find ways to supervise, educate, and feed children who would normally be in school. Further, teachers and school counselors cannot witness the signs of abuse and report to the proper authorities if students are not in class. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention surveyed Americans in June 2020 and noted that symptoms of depression and anxiety in young people has risen, leading to an increase in teen suicide or the contemplation of suicide for teens and young adults at a rate that is twice as high as their adult counterparts. We feel that our district’s confirmed student COVID-19 cases are in line with other coastal schools while our quarantine rate is much less, allowing our students to experience normalcy and to escape the potential harms that the isolation of quarantining can pose.

| COVID-19 School Comparison | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|------------|---|--|---|--|
| District | School | Enrollment | Totals | | Percent of Enrollment | |
| | | | Total COVID-19 Student Cases Reported Since the start of school | Total Students Reported as Quarantined Since the start of school | Total COVID-19 Student Cases Reported Since the start of school | Total Students Reported as Quarantined Since the start of school |
| Bay-Waveland | Bay High | 526 | 8 | 41 | 2% | 8% |
| Biloxi | Biloxi High | 1742 | 38 | 307 | 2% | 18% |
| Harrison County | D'Iberville High | 1284 | 26 | 222 | 2% | 17% |
| Jackson County | East Central High | 775 | 31 | 55 | 4% | 7% |
| Pascagoula-Gautier | Gautier High | 877 | 0 | 62 | 0% | 7% |
| Gulfport | Gulfport High | 1765 | 34 | 1156 | 2% | 65% |
| Hancock County | Hancock High | 1306 | 45 | 494 | 3% | 38% |
| Harrison County | Harrison Central High | 1479 | 27 | 355 | 2% | 24% |
| Long Beach | Long Beach High | 895 | 14 | 442 | 2% | 49% |
| Moss Point | Moss Point High | 476 | 9 | 106 | 2% | 22% |
| Ocean Springs | Ocean Springs High | 1808 | 24 | 719 | 1% | 40% |
| Pascagoula-Gautier | Pascagoula High | 1091 | 28 | 197 | 3% | 18% |
| Pass Christian | Pass Christian High | 653 | 18 | 228 | 3% | 35% |
| Jackson County | St. Martin High | 1249 | 33 | 70 | 3% | 6% |
| Jackson County | Vancleave High | 718 | 26 | 69 | 4% | 10% |
| Harrison County | West Harrison High | 1045 | 17 | 312 | 2% | 30% |

*Data Source for Graph: Data reported to Mississippi Department of Health by each school district through October 23, 2020.

Data released from the Mississippi Department of Health (MSDH), shown above, indicates coastal high school COVID-19 numbers as reported to MSDH by each school district from August to present. While every high school on the coast has had 4% or less positive COVID-19 incidences, some schools have lost valuable instructional hours by quarantining healthy students. For example, a school with a population of 1,300 that has quarantined 500 students over the course of the school year so far, when multiplied by 5.5 hours (330 minutes of instruction per day), results in a loss of between 2,750-27,500 in-person instructional hours depending on the length of the quarantine period. Granted, a small portion of those hours represent students who tested positive for COVID-19. However, considering that every coastal high school has had 4% or less positive student cases, roughly 35% of healthy students in the sample above lost a significant number of instructional hours due to being quarantined. There is no doubt that the safety of all students is

paramount, and no one wants students to be ill, but Mississippi Department of Health data shows that school-aged children are the least likely age group to be affected by the virus.

After reviewing the data, I feel more confident than ever in the decision to only require the quarantine of positive COVID-19 students while allowing parents the choice to quarantine their child(ren) possibly exposed to COVID-19 during an outbreak. In Jackson County School District, quarantine numbers show that most parents have chosen in-person learning as opposed to virtual upon exposure, all while maintaining low positive COVID-19 numbers. It is hard for me in good conscience to have healthy children trying to learn “virtually” at home when we in JCSD have typically not had more than a quarter of one percent of our students with COVID-19 at any one time. Mandatory quarantine of healthy students? I say not!

For more information, including data sources mentioned in this press release, please contact my office at (228) 283-3000 or me, personally, at (989)-233-2490.