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TO: Bay County Public and Private School Administrators  
FROM: Joel R. Strasz, Health Officer  
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**RE: CASE INVESTIGATION AND CONTACT TRACING IN K-12 SCHOOLS**

Since fall 2020, the Bay County Health Department (BCHD) has advised local schools how COVID-19 mitigation protocols can create safer environments for students and staff. In-school transmission can be kept relatively low and classrooms can remain open when schools implement a multi-layered disease prevention strategy, including: promoting all recommended vaccinations; adopting a universal requirement for wearing high-quality, well-fitting masks; adding air purification to improve ventilation and indoor air quality; excluding known cases from school during their infectious period; and identifying and testing close contacts. We know students benefit from in-person instruction, not only for learning purposes but also for socialization that contributes to their overall health and wellbeing, and BCHD continues working to ensure that school operations can be sustained.

The emergence of the highly infectious Omicron variant has driven a sharp rise in cases in our community: during the past 7 days there were 2,161 cases among Bay County residents, NOT counting those identified via at-home testing. Very often a person can be exposed to the coronavirus, develop infection, and become infectious to others before BCHD is able to even identify the person as a case, much less get word to those who are exposed. While transmission can occur in schools, the current conditions of community spread mean that when students and staff are outside of school they are experiencing nearly ubiquitous exposure opportunities, including within households, at private indoor gatherings, and while participating in higher-risk activities (e.g., indoor sporting events).

In light of these circumstances, this week BCHD will change course on case investigation and contact tracing by suspending quarantine of close contacts identified within classroom settings. As described in further detail below, BCHD will reiterate and expand upon our advice to school leaders regarding the steps that will be essential to helping schools stay open and keep students in class during this period when COVID-19 is rapidly spreading throughout the community.

Vaccines, boosters, and masks are the best available tools for avoiding serious illness and interrupting chains of further transmission to others. Vaccinated persons can still get infected, especially if it's been more than 5 months since completing the original vaccination series (i.e., the second dose of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines or else the single dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine). However, vaccinated persons often experience a cold-like illness, feeling better after just a few days, or may not feel sick at all. Communities with high rates of vaccination have lower hospitalization rates and fewer deaths than communities with low vaccination rates.

**School leaders are to do the following:**

- 1) Direct persons who test positive or have new onset COVID-like symptoms to stay home and isolate for at least five (5) full days. Persons can return to school as early as day 6 provided that fever has resolved, other symptoms have shown significant improvement, AND they are willing to wear a well-fitting mask. Schools may include testing upon return, to determine potential infection status.
- 2) Direct persons who reside in the same household with a case to quarantine (unless exempt) until the isolation end date of the most recently identified household case, either returning to school with a negative test or else after another 5 days of quarantine.
- 3) Report all newly identified cases to BCHD within 24 hours.
- 4) Notify affected families when exposures occur within the school setting.
- 5) Use testing to prevent persons who are infectious from contributing to in-school transmission. Support testing as much as available resources allow and only with consent from parents/guardians. Prioritize testing as follows: (1) upon development of symptoms; (2) upon return to school after confirmed or presumed infection; and (3) upon request for screening following exposure. To conserve testing resources, BCHD does not recommend testing all persons who might have been exposed in classroom settings.

- 6) Carefully consider and implement other mitigation strategies, including: universal indoor masking with high-quality, well-fitting masks; adding air purification to improve ventilation; physical distancing; cohorting; and hygiene measures.

**In order to prevent further spread parents, students and staff should:**

- 1) Get every recommended COVID-19 vaccine, including boosters, as soon as possible.
- 2) Whenever occupying an indoor space with persons outside your household, wear a high-quality, well-fitting mask, such as an N95, KN95, or KF94.
- 3) Monitor for new onset COVID-like symptoms daily.
- 4) Make sure that persons who test positive or experience new onset COVID-like symptoms:
  - a. Stay home, seek testing, isolate for five full days (if positive), and immediately report positive test results the school.
  - b. Return to school as early as day 6 provided that the following apply:
    - i. Fever has resolved (for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications), other symptoms have shown significant improvement.
    - ii. Depending on the availability of resources, schools may opt to utilize rapid antigen testing to determine infection status.
    - iii. Students/staff returning must wear a well-fitting mask for the remainder of the 10 days.
  - c. Identify and provide exposure notification to their own close contacts (e.g., family, friends, coworkers, and associates).
- 5) Persons who continue to reside in the same household as a case are to stay home and quarantine (unless exempt\*) until the isolation end date of the most recently identified household case. If returning to school, it is highly recommended that they be tested upon return to determine potential infection.
- 6) Persons who have been exposed during higher-risk events (e.g., indoor sporting events) or who were identified as known close contacts to cases residing outside their household or should test on day 5 after their most recent exposure.

\* Persons will be exempt from quarantine if:

Age 5 to 17 years and have received at least two doses of COVID-19 vaccine at least 2 weeks ago;  
Age 18 years or older and have received all recommended vaccine doses, including boosters and additional primary doses for immunocompromised people; OR  
Tested positive within the last 90 days. Having a history of infection prior to the emergence of the Omicron variant (after 11-30-2021) is no guarantee that a person will avoid infection from Omicron.