



Date: August 25, 2020
To: Gallatin County Schools Superintendents
From: Matt Kelley, Health Officer, Gallatin City-County Health Department
Subject: School-based athletics during COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction and Background

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in more than 170,000 deaths in the United States since March, 2020, and has caused widespread disruption for schools and the children they serve. With the 2020-21 school year approaching, local school districts throughout the nation and in Gallatin County are grappling with difficult and complex plans to re-open schools in a way that is as safe as possible for students and staff. The leadership of local school districts is driving this work through consultation with public health officials and input from parents, staff, and the community.

The complex and difficult work to re-open schools includes decisions about competitive sports and sporting events that are sponsored by schools. School-based sports support the academic, emotional, social, and physical development of students. There is wide agreement that sports provide valuable benefit to students, schools, and communities. Sporting events, particularly those with large crowds during a pandemic, also present health risks to participants and spectators and public health concerns for the community. Nationally, numerous schools districts have been forced to postpone or cancel practices, games, and fall seasons due to COVID-19 cases and outbreaks associated with athletes and teams. Some colleges and universities (including those in Montana) have elected to postpone fall sports altogether and those professional sports leagues that are playing are doing so without spectators in order to limit disease spread.

In an effort to find a balance between the benefits of youth sports and the public health risk posed by such activities, Gallatin City-County Health Department engaged school district superintendents from throughout the county. Superintendents who participated in this effort include those from Belgrade School District, Big Sky School District, Bozeman Public Schools, Manhattan Christian School, Manhattan School District, Three Forks Schools, and West Yellowstone School. The shared goal of this collaboration was:

- To share information and concerns related to the public health risks as well as the academic, physical, social and emotional benefits of school-based sports;
- To find consensus on a unified approach for school athletics in Gallatin County that provides a consistent way to allow kids to play (if schools decide to play) while reducing risk as much as possible.



As a foundation for this shared effort, it is important to acknowledge that risk elimination is not possible. The aim of these recommendations is to mitigate and manage the range of risks associated with athletics during a respiratory disease pandemic. It is also important to acknowledge the likelihood that there will be cases of COVID-19 associated with athletes, teams, and athletic events. Likewise, it is also important to acknowledge the risks that come with cancellation of school-based sports and the loss of important ways to engage children and encourage healthy behaviors and social/emotional growth.

In seeking to strike this balance, school superintendents and the Gallatin County Health Officer agreed that the foremost priority should be the opportunity for students to compete in manner that is as safe as possible for students and the community. Participants in this effort also agreed that the desire to have large crowds at sporting event is understandable, but also brings significant public health risk that could cause disease spread and imperil other school operations.

It is the consensus opinion of superintendents and the health officer that starting school athletics with reduced crowd size and careful social distancing measures provides the best chance for allowing students to compete as safely as possible and finish their season. The group also agreed that these plans may evolve over time as we work together to monitor the size and nature of our local epidemiology and schools' efforts to operate safely.

In the spirit of this collaborative effort and the principles and ideas expressed above, Gallatin City-County recommends the following measures be implemented by all Gallatin County schools for the fall semester of the 2020-21 school year.

Recommendations:

COVID-19 practices for games, contests, or performances

- Athletic events should be focused on the athletes' opportunity to compete as safely as possible in venues that allow appropriate social distancing in locker rooms, on sidelines and benches;
- Team personnel and athletes should be screened before every practice or competition for symptoms of COVID-19. All team members and personnel should be asked the same screening questions and be required to follow the same guidelines in acting on positive screening responses;
- In an effort to reduce the number of athletes subject to quarantine should one member become positive for COVID-19, coaches should make reasonable efforts to reduce intermixing of groups. This can be accomplished by having the same small group of individuals practice drills together, use the weight room together, sit together on the bus, sit together for team meetings, and social distance on the sidelines and during practice;
- It is the responsibility of the sponsoring school (home team) to make available locker rooms and facilities and to manage events in a manner that minimizes the risk of disease spread. This may require additional meeting space be made available and/or the rotation of cohorts of athletes into locker rooms;
- All team personnel (including but not limited to coaches, managers, and trainers) and players should wear face coverings when they are not exercising in a strenuous manner including but not limited to on the sidelines, in staging areas for cross country competitions, during team discussions such as a timeout, during halftime and breaks in play of practice. Each individual should have her/his own face covering and face coverings should not be shared.
- For outdoor sports and to the extent possible by physical space, players on the sideline should stand or sit at least 6 feet apart while waiting to compete or practice. For football, each team should be limited to 60 players per sideline and a face covering should be worn whenever a



player is out of the game for more than one play; helmets, including helmets with face shields, do not meet this requirement. For soccer, a mask should be worn whenever a player is out of the game. For golf, a mask should be worn anytime two or more players are not separated by at least 6 feet. For cross country, a mask should be worn when the participant is not running.

- For indoor sports and to the extent possible by physical space, sideline chairs should be placed at least 6 feet apart, assigned to a specific team member, and a mask specific to that player at each chair so they are ready to be donned and doffed as needed during competition or practice. Masking is required while not engaging in strenuous activity. A mask should be worn whenever a player is out of the game.
- Given the critical importance of maintaining hydration, teams should provide water or other hydrating drinks. Individual, non-shared water bottles or non-shared disposable cups are to be used. Refilling should be assigned to a team support person who should wear gloves and a mask while refilling containers to reduce the risk of virus transmission to surfaces.
- Each school should develop and implement processes to ensure that uniforms for both practice and games are washed at the highest temperature and sanitized according to the school's defined sanitation procedure so that clean uniforms are ready for use at the next practice or game. This procedure will significantly reduce the risk that clothing that might have been contaminated during a practice or game does not become a means to transmit infectious virus.
- Meals during travel for competition will be of the "boxed" variety to limit time waiting in line to order, reduce handling of meals by multiple people, and obviate the inherent physical distancing problems associated with dine-in meal services. In out-of-town communities, teams are encouraged to pre-order meals and use "grab and go" strategies.
- A line list should be created each game consisting of players, coaches, trainers, referees, etc. in attendance for contact tracing purposes. Teams should not rely on just the roster alone due to potential absences of players or staff.

COVID-19 practices for managing spectators

- Spectators at all sporting events should be limited to two spectators per student participant and up to six coaches from the sponsoring (home) school.
- All spectators should wear a face covering and maintain social distancing from other family groups; when social distancing is not possible or not observed the sponsor should require and take reasonable measures to ensure that all spectators wear a face covering that covers their nose and mouth. Masks are required whether indoors or outdoors when social distancing is not being practiced;
- Visiting fans will not be allowed at events except if the home team is hosting a Gallatin County school and the home team elects to allow spectators from the opposing school. The visiting Gallatin County school would also be allowed two tickets per athlete if the sponsor school determines that the facility can allow effective social distancing with those additional spectators;
- It is the responsibility of the sponsor (home team) school to distribute tickets and manage spectators;
- At all times, and notwithstanding provisions specified above, spectators at all events should have adequate space for social distancing (6 feet between family groups). If a facility is not large enough to allow adequate social distancing, the sponsor school should reduce the number of spectators at the event;
- In order to reduce congestion and crowding, concessions should not be offered;



- In order to reduce the number of people at the event, bands should not be in attendance;
- Schools may elect to allow a limited number of cheerleaders at that school's home game if that activity can be accommodated with adequate social distancing. Schools should avoid allowing visiting team cheerleaders to minimize risk due to travel. As cheerleading is an activity sanctioned by the Montana High School Association, cheerleaders should be held to the same disease prevention measures applied to student athletes.

COVID-19 practices for the news media

Members of the media, including videographers preparing sports reels, may be allowed to attend school athletic events for purposes of covering the event and reporting only (i.e., not as fans but in their professional capacity) subject to the following restrictions:

- Members of the media should be masked at all times while at the event;
- Members of the media should conduct interviews or film participants from a distance of at least 6 feet from the person(s) being interviewed or filmed;
- Microphones or other audio recording devices should be sanitized after every interview.

COVID-19 Practices for transportation

- Transportation to away games require athletes to sit on buses in assigned seats with the same seatmates and identical front to back order across the season to help limit exposure to other people on the bus, while aiding in contact tracing if necessary. Masks should be worn while waiting for and riding on busses.
- To the extent feasible, athletes and staff should be socially distanced and sit in their assigned seat whenever they are in the bus;
- The interior of each bus (e.g., seats, seat backs, windows, etc.) should be sanitized according to the bus operator's processes, after arrival at each site and prior to re-boarding for another segment of the travel.
- Any individuals associated with the team, including but not limited to coaches, medical personnel, District administrators, etc., who share rides in a vehicle other than on the team bus should be masked throughout the trip.
- Schools should avoid all overnight trips until further notice with the exception of post-season play.
- Parents should be encouraged to remain in their vehicle during drop-off and pick-up--reducing the congregation of groups outside of school buildings.
- Riders should board the bus in an orderly manner that minimized crowding or lines.

COVID-19 practices for managing trainers and locker rooms

- Locker rooms can be open at 75% of their capacity as long as social distancing requirements can be maintained and follow schools sanitization processes;
- Athletes should be encouraged to shower at home.
- Athletes will be encouraged to leave the locker room as soon as possible.
- Showers, if absolutely necessary (i.e. an athlete going straight to work from practice) should be limited to one athlete per shower tree or individualized shower stall.
- Athletes and coaches should wear face coverings at all times while in the locker room except for while showering.
- Coaches are responsible for sanitizing all equipment with disinfectant before, during and after each practice and competition. [Ball and Equipment Cleaning Guidelines](#)



COVID-19 practices in the event of a confirmed case

- If a team member or personnel tests positive for COVID-19, Gallatin City-County Health Department will work with the school and affected individuals to reduce the risks of disease spread. This will include [a contact tracing investigation](#) and implementation of isolation of the person testing positive and quarantine for those identified as close contacts. For COVID-19, a close contact is defined as any individual who was within 6 feet of an infected person for at least 15 minutes starting from 2 days before illness onset (or, for asymptomatic patients, 2 days prior to positive specimen collection) until the time the patient is isolated.

