



10850 East Woodmen Road · Peyton, CO 80831
Tel: 719.495.1100 · Fax: 719.494.8900

For Immediate Release

August 19, 2021

Contact: David Nancarrow
Director of Communications
dnancarrow@d49.org

District 49 Leadership on Local COVID Response

El Paso County, Colo. (August 19, 2021) — In District 49, we saw first-hand the damaging effects of an overzealous quarantine regimen during the 20-21 school year. Despite aggressive masking, tracing, and quarantine protocols, our community still endured multiple waves of variants and transmission, including widespread displacement into online learning. Ultimately, not a single child in our district died from COVID, and very few required hospitalization—fewer than in a typical flu season. Meanwhile, our larger community lost 15 youth to suicide, and the Colorado Children’s hospital issued a “State of Emergency” for youth mental health, declaring in May that, “we are seeing our pediatric emergency departments and our inpatient units overrun with kids attempting suicide and suffering from other forms of major mental health illness.”

In light of these severe impacts, we are grateful to Governor Polis and the state health system for acknowledging that local school districts are best positioned to provide leadership for quarantine protocols. We now have 18 months of direct experience with the actual impacts of transmission, infection, and quarantine. It is our judgement, backed by months of student and community observation and interaction, with corresponding experiential data, that the risks of quarantine far outweigh the risks of the disease. That is why we will not facilitate voluntary reporting and contact tracing that are designed to direct healthy individuals into quarantine and isolation. Despite public mischaracterization to the contrary, our practice complies with [guidance](#) from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

In a press conference on Wednesday, August 18, Governor Polis asserted that schools must report all cases. “That is the law. That is unambiguous.” In response to Governor Polis’ assertion, we respectfully disagree that the guidance is unambiguous. For example, current state guidance, available at <https://covid19.colorado.gov/practical-guide-for-operationalizing-cdc-school-guidance> states:

Peter Hilts
Chief Education Officer

Brett Ridgway
Chief Business Officer

Pedro Almeida
Chief Operations Officer

Sue Holmes
Falcon Zone Leader

Andy Franko
iConnect Zone Leader

Dan Snowberger
POWER Zone Leader

Sean Dorsey
Sand Creek Zone Leader



10850 East Woodmen Road · Peyton, CO 80831
Tel: 719.495.1100 · Fax: 719.494.8900

Clinical labs and/or health care providers are required to report all COVID-19 test results, both positive and negative, to public health. **If school personnel perform and interpret rapid testing on-site**, they are functioning as a clinical lab and are required to report all results. Schools and child care facilities are also **encouraged** to report single cases of which they become aware to their local public health agency, even if testing was performed elsewhere. (emphasis added)

In all cases where anyone reports a single positive result, the lab or medical provider is obligated to report that condition. It is not the school's responsibility to take on the reporting responsibility of a testing lab or medical provider. We are not qualified or equipped to make medical determinations, so we decline to pass on secondhand, unverified information or rumors about who may have COVID.

In his remarks, Governor Polis was quite clear that implementing quarantines is a school district decision. He said, "Quarantine protocols...we give the best guidance to districts and it is up to them to implement" and "The quarantine protocols we have the guidance and it is at the school districts [level] how to implement that." However, in El Paso County, the health department is directing staff and students to isolate and quarantine, despite the governor's assertion that quarantine decisions are a district prerogative. The contradiction between the Governor and county messaging creates ambiguity, which we resolve by exercising local leadership.

We continue to collaborate closely with El Paso County Public Health, including daily consultation about reported cases and transmission. If staff or families are concerned about their status, we recommend they consult directly with a medical professional who can conduct conclusive testing and make any required medical reports.

Because schools are gathering places for our community, we may experience a cluster of positive cases. We believe it is misleading to call those incidents an "outbreak" because the school is almost never the source of the transmission. However, if the cluster of cases includes five different households, we do discuss that information with county health so they can determine whether or not to declare a public health outbreak.

Peter Hilts
Chief Education Officer

Brett Ridgway
Chief Business Officer

Pedro Almeida
Chief Operations Officer

Sue Holmes
Falcon Zone Leader

Andy Franko
iConnect Zone Leader

Dan Snowberger
POWER Zone Leader

Sean Dorsey
Sand Creek Zone Leader



10850 East Woodmen Road · Peyton, CO 80831
Tel: 719.495.1100 · Fax: 719.494.8900

We inform our staff and our district families if they are exposed to individuals who report positive for COVID-19. We trust those individuals to make decisions that match their values and level of sensitivity. For some in our community, the current level of exposure justifies wearing masks in public. By direct observation, we can confirm that for the overwhelming majority of parents, students, and staff in District 49, current transmission levels and exposure potential do not justify universal masking.

In District 49, we appreciate the protection afforded by multiple vaccine options, and we respect that some individuals may choose not to vaccinate. When vaccines become available to our younger students, we will host mobile vaccination sites just as we have for students older than 12. We also continue to encourage strong personal hygiene practices, rigorous school cleaning schedules, and of course—for everyone to stay home when sick until fully recovered. We have been operating on those protocols since June 1, through weeks of summer school and now three weeks of in-person instruction. We have detected and responded to individual cases by following common-sense measures without sending healthy individuals into unnecessary and disruptive quarantines.

Far from ignoring science or safety, we have determined that overreacting to the *possibility* of transmission has been bad for learning, bad for mental health, and ultimately far worse for our students than the low-level medical risk of a virus that rarely causes any significant issues for children. As our county health department said in their community update on August 17, “While children can contract COVID-19, the local rates of hospitalization remain much lower than other age groups.” This insight is confirmed by Colorado hospitals, which indicate that child infections with both RSV and Rhinovirus (common cold) are more prevalent than COVID-19. ([Denver Gazette, 08-18-21](#))

We urge the District 49 family to remain informed and attentive to conditions in our community. We also commit to model respect for people on all sides of these issues, when we agree—and especially when we don't.

-30-

Peter Hilts
Chief Education Officer

Brett Ridgway
Chief Business Officer

Pedro Almeida
Chief Operations Officer

Sue Holmes
Falcon Zone Leader

Andy Franko
iConnect Zone Leader

Dan Snowberger
POWER Zone Leader

Sean Dorsey
Sand Creek Zone Leader



10850 East Woodmen Road · Peyton, CO 80831
Tel: 719.495.1100 · Fax: 719.494.8900

Peter Hiltz
Chief Education Officer

Brett Ridgway
Chief Business Officer

Pedro Almeida
Chief Operations Officer

Sue Holmes
Falcon Zone Leader

Andy Franko
iConnect Zone Leader

Dan Snowberger
POWER Zone Leader

Sean Dorsey
Sand Creek Zone Leader