



August 24, 2020

VIA E-MAIL

Christopher S. Wolfel, Ed.D.
Executive Director
Colonial Intermediate Unit 20
6 Danforth Drive
Easton, PA 18045-7899

Re: **COVID-19 and Return to High School Sports Competition**

Dear Dr. Wolfel:

St. Luke's University Health Network applauds the tremendous efforts being made by school district superintendents, local school officials and athletic administrators to provide a safe environment for the training and conditioning of high school student-athletes. As you know, contingent upon the approval of local school officials, the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association (PIAA) has cleared the way for the competitive sports season to begin. This comes after a two week delay in the 2020-2021 PIAA Sports Calendar precipitated by Governor Wolf's announcement strongly recommending that school sports be postponed until at least January 1, 2021. The Governor cited his Administration's concern for significant health risks to participants and the public as the basis for his recommendation. Similar to the PIAA, the Governor's Office deferred the final decision on competitive sports to local school district officials.

Due to the inherent risk of injury or illness during sport, parents and competitors always complete a risk benefit assessment prior to participation. During an active pandemic such as COVID-19, this decision becomes much more complicated as participation in specific sports and the logistics surrounding those sports (locker rooms, equipment, transportation, etc.) increases the risk of spreading the virus. Given the complexity associated with this decision, and since schools, parents and athletes may weigh the risks and benefits differently, St. Luke's cannot issue a specific recommendation whether sports should be played. However, as discussed during our conference call on August 21, 2020, school leaders are encouraged to examine the following factors carefully before reaching a decision regarding interscholastic sports at their respective schools:

- School districts throughout our region are currently in the "moderate" risk classification. No school districts are in a "hot spot" zone.
- While children infected with COVID-19 are less likely to develop severe illness compared with adults, children are still at risk of developing severe illness and complications from COVID-19. The number and rate of COVID-19 cases in children in the United States have been steadily increasing. Similar to adults, children with severe COVID-19 may develop respiratory failure, myocarditis, shock, acute renal failure, coagulopathy, and multi-organ system failure. Children infected with COVID-19 are also at risk for developing multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C). Although current evidence suggests that children are unlikely to be major drivers of the spread of the virus, they can transmit the virus to other children and adults.
- Incidence of reported positive cases since initiating the voluntary workout period for high school sports has been extremely low. Athletic directors and coaches have done an excellent

- job of returning District XI student-athletes to exercise without undue risk in viral transmission, as almost all positive cases among athletes appear to be the result of activities outside of sports.
- Sports that involve close, sustained contact between participants, lack significant protective barriers, and have a high probability that respiratory particles will be transmitted are considered “High Risk” for transmission.¹ According to the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), football appears to be the only fall sport classified as “High Risk”, although wrestling, boys lacrosse, competitive cheer and dance are also included as examples of high risk sports. Conversely, the NCAA includes both field hockey and volleyball in the “High Risk” category, as well as basketball, wrestling and lacrosse.²
 - According to the NFHS, “Moderate Risk” sports are those that “involve close, sustained contact, but with protective equipment in place that may reduce the likelihood of respiratory particle transmission between participants OR intermittent close contact OR group sports OR sports that use equipment that can’t be cleaned between participants.” According to the NFHS, moderate risk sports include basketball, volleyball, baseball, softball, soccer, water polo, gymnastics (if equipment can’t be sufficiently cleaned between competitors), ice hockey, field hockey, tennis, swimming relays, pole vault, high jump, long jump, girls lacrosse, crew with two or more rowers in shell and 7 on 7 football, although certain sports may be considered lower risk with certain precautions. The NCAA also includes cross country in the “Medium” or moderate risk category.
 - According to the NFHS, “Lower Risk” sports are those “that can be done with social distancing or individually with no sharing of equipment or the ability to clean the equipment between use by competitors.” According to NFHS, lower risk sports include individual running events, throwing events (javelin, shot put, discus), individual swimming, golf, weightlifting, alpine skiing, sideline cheer, single sculling and cross country running (with staggered starts). The NCAA classifies tennis as a “Low Risk Sport”.
 - The ability to eliminate or minimize “Danger Zones” is critical. These areas include locker rooms, buses (transportation), equipment rooms and travel from low to higher risk areas. Resocialization plans must include detailed strategies for these areas.
 - Likewise, the PIAA published guidance entitled “Return to Competition: Individual Sport Guidelines” designed to provide strategies for mitigating risk of disease transmission by sport.³ Strict adherence to these guidelines may mitigate the risk of disease transmission in sport.

¹ The Sports Medicine Advisory Committee of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) has provided comprehensive guidance concerning participation in high school sports (https://www.nfhs.org/media/3812287/2020-nfhs-guidance-for-opening-up-high-school-athletics-and-activities-nfhs-smac-may-15_2020-final.pdf), which differs slightly from the NCAA model. Pages 8 and 9 of the published guidance stratifies sports into risk categories.

² The NCAA issued guidance entitled, “Core Principles of Resocialization of Collegiate Sport: Developing Standards for Practice and Competition Frequently Asked Questions” (<http://www.ncaa.org/sport-science-institute/core-principles-resocialization-collegiate-sport-developing-standards-practice-and-competition>).

³ See http://www.piaa.org/assets/web/documents/Return_to_Competition.pdf.

- The physical, mental and emotional benefits of interscholastic sports participation are well documented. The incidence of depression and other mental health conditions among students, including high school and college athletes, during COVID-19 has been reported.
- The mental and emotional benefits of the coach-to-athlete and athlete-to-athlete relationships are also well-documented. Strategies to maintain these connections are important.
- The importance of regular physical activity and measured resocialization to sport and other extracurricular opportunities is critical. Whether or not competition is recommended by a District, structured opportunities for student-athletes should continue.

While we will not make a recommendation concerning the reasonableness of competitive sports, the guidance from NFHS, NCAA and PIAA should be considered, especially regarding the risk categories of different sports and other steps that can be taken to minimize risk of transmission. The ultimate decision must be based on how schools, parents and athletes weigh the risks and benefits outlined above. It is possible that districts may come to a variety of conclusions on how to proceed based on their evaluation of these and other factors. Regardless of the decision made by our partners, St. Luke's is available to support districts as necessary based on the science and the evolving knowledge of COVID-19.

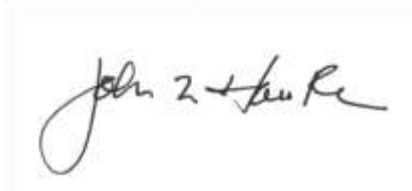
As announcements regarding a return to high school athletics and competition surfaced, St. Luke's has provided the most current information on COVID-19 and offered guidance to assist school district superintendents, school boards and athletic directors. Our response to the COVID-19 pandemic is, and will continue to be, fluid, as we continue our commitment to our valued partners in education.

We are available to answer any follow up questions you may have after reviewing this letter.

Sincerely,

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