

Georgia withholds school COVID-19 counts from public



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Kara Dutton, principal, waves as school buses arrive at Jackson Elementary School in Lawrenceville on the first day of school for younger students amid the coronavirus outbreak on Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2020. Gwinnett County Public Schools does report COVID-19 cases by school on its website. Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com

Georgia health officials have decided to withhold information about coronavirus infections at each school, saying the public has no legal right to information about outbreaks that the state is investigating.

The Georgia Department of Public Health started requiring weekly reports from the schools last month and initially said it might share the information with the public. The decision not to reveal the number of COVID-19 case counts and related quarantines and “clusters” means the only recourse for parents and teachers trying to gauge the risk is the willingness of their local school system to publicize its own data.

Some school districts in Georgia are not revealing what is going on in each of their schools, though. If they do disclose anything, it is often districtwide numbers that make it difficult to discern the risk within each school.

Indeed, lack of school compliance is one reason the Georgia Department of Public Health gave for withholding the data. About 70% of public schools have complied with the agency’s request for weekly

reports from each school, so about 700 of Georgia's 2,300 schools are not reporting to the state's new data portal, though the agency says it is mandatory.

Not only has the agency declined to publish what school information it could gather since it started collecting the numbers directly from each school, but it cited a legal exemption for data collected as part of "an outbreak or cluster investigation" when it declined to release the information to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution after a request under the state open records law.

In mid-September, the agency agreed to produce the data, but this week reversed itself, suggesting that it feared schools would not report to the state if the state then made their data public: "The Department is concerned about possible non-cooperation of schools in reporting data and has decided to maintain the confidentiality of the weekly COVID-19 school reports," the agency's open records denial says.

Agency spokeswoman Nancy Nydam cited the legal exemption for outbreak investigations when she declined to reveal which schools are not cooperating. When asked what the agency is doing to compel schools to disclose their cases, she said by email that "public health has never resorted to law to enforce reporting" though a district health director could issue an administrative order to comply "if deemed necessary."

Frank LoMonte, an open records expert at the University of Florida, said the exemption claimed by health officials applies to documents but not to the aggregated data requested by the AJC.

Is your school disclosing information about the number of COVID-19 cases? And if so do you have a good reason to doubt the accuracy? Let us know at CoronavirusEducation@ajc.com

Most metro Atlanta parents have not encountered this issue yet, since their schools are mostly operating online, though that is beginning to change. But many parents around the state have been sending their children into classrooms for weeks already.

"It's hard for parents to determine the risk level," said Micaela Hobbs, a mother of two high school students in Oconee County near Athens. She reluctantly chose to send them to school because they are in honors classes and there was no option to get credit for those online.

"I really want to know where these cases are so I can gauge where my kid is in relation to these positive cases," Hobbs said.

The secrecy is not unique to Georgia, where public health officials recently reported that from Sept. 6 to Sept 12, [schools were the leading source](#) of outbreaks. A high school teacher in Kansas has resorted to crowdsourcing cases nationally. "I wanted to do my part in getting the information out there," the teacher, Alisha Morris, [told neaToday](#), a publication of the National Education Association.

Parents in Georgia have resorted to crowdsourcing, too.

Andrea Wellnitz, another Oconee County mother of high school students, started a Facebook school safety group that has about 1,400 members in a county of about 40,000.

Wellnitz chose to keep her two children online because she couldn't get answers to questions like whether the desks would be kept at least 3 feet apart, as the American Academy of Pediatrics [has recommended](#).

“Nobody has ever answered that question,” she said.

Parents such as Ife Bonner in Houston County south of Atlanta have been swapping information on Facebook, too. She said the principal at her son’s high school alerted parents about a coronavirus infection in August but chose not to tell them about a second one that he learned about soon after. Bonner said he also told her son — and later, her, when she confronted him about it — that they had a right not to answer the phone if contact tracers called. Her son had to quarantine due to close contact with an infected person at his high school.

“There is no transparency about what’s going on in the schools,” said Bonner, who has four children attending Houston County Schools.

A Houston County Schools spokeswoman confirmed by email that the high school principal disclosed one case to the entire school community on that day in August but chose not to disclose the second one because he learned of it on the same day. She said he did alert all close contacts in both cases. As for the need to talk with the Department of Public Health should they call, the spokeswoman, Beth McLaughlin, said the principal had merely responded to a student who had asked if it was mandatory to talk, saying “that this was between the student and their parents.”

In Emanuel County, where [a teacher has been on a ventilator](#) since contracting COVID-19 in August, the district only started publishing case counts on its website last week. And those numbers are districtwide, so it’s unclear what’s happening in each school.

Dr. Cedric Porter, a family physician there for 33 years, said many parents who bring their children to him say they are worried about whether their schools are safe. Porter said he is concerned that masks are not mandatory and that the district is not disclosing information about infections at each school.

“They act as if these kids don’t go home to parents, grandparents, uncles and others who have chronic illnesses,” Porter said. “What we’re seeing now is the spread from children to their at-risk parents and grandparents. And the season is young.”