

Standardized COVID-19 K-12 School Surveillance Guidance for Classification of Clusters and Outbreaks

Version 1: August 6, 2021

Background and Justification

National surveillance of K–12 school-associated COVID-19 cases has been impeded by the lack of a nation-wide standardized surveillance system and by varying state and territorial policies for data collection and reporting. Currently, there are no national estimates of K–12 school-associated COVID-19 events among students, teachers, and staff, preventing the characterization of the COVID-19 burden in the school setting. A report by the National Governors Association (NGA) found that beyond long-term care settings, there are 18 states reporting other setting-specific outbreak data, including school-associated outbreaks, on their websites.¹ This report found states were more likely to report setting-specific outbreaks if they had a defined threshold for confirmed outbreaks in at least one setting or venue (beyond long-term care facilities) and reported the information regularly.¹ Additionally, a web-scraping activity conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) during December 2020 reviewed every state-based, public-facing website for K–12 COVID-19-related information, finding that one-third of U.S. states provided publicly available K–12 data. School-associated COVID-19 surveillance coverage by states and territories that do not publish these data on public-facing websites is currently unknown.

To better understand the current state of COVID-19 school surveillance data across state, territorial, local and tribal jurisdictions and to work towards more comprehensive and comparable surveillance solutions, CDC conducted a National Data Call from February—March 2021. An objective of the data call was to compile the various school-associated COVID-19 cluster and outbreak definitions being utilized by jurisdictions. The definitions for school-associated COVID-19 cases and clusters varied widely across jurisdictions with the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases required to classify a school-associated cluster or outbreak ranging from two to 15. Additionally, qualitative data from the call indicated that jurisdictions would benefit from guidance on standardized definitions for school-associated COVID-19 surveillance.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide standardized definitions for K-12 school-associated COVID-19 cases, transmission, clusters, and outbreaks for jurisdictional use.

1. National Governors' Association. (January 2021). COVID-19 Outbreaks: State Reporting by Setting. Retrieved July 6, 2021 from https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/NGA_Covid-19-Outbreaks_State-Reporting.pdf

Goals of COVID-19 School Surveillance

Surveillance of school-associated COVID-19 cases, clusters, and outbreaks is necessary to characterize the epidemiology of the disease in the school setting, to measure the burden of disease in the school setting, and to inform public health action, including monitoring the impact of vaccination.

Statement of the desired action(s) to be taken

Jurisdictions may utilize these definitions to identify school-associated COVID-19 cases, clusters, and outbreaks and make public health recommendations for school data collection and reporting.

CSTE recommends the following actions:

1. Implement a standardized surveillance case definition for school-associated COVID-19.
 - a. Utilize standardized criteria for case ascertainment for school-associated COVID-19 cases.
 - b. Utilize standardized criteria for cluster ascertainment for school-associated COVID-19 clusters.
 - c. Utilize standardized criteria for outbreak ascertainment for school-associated COVID-19 outbreaks.

Standardized K-12 school-associated classification:

K-12 school-associated: [COVID-19 case](#) (confirmed or probable) who is a student, teacher, or staff member physically present in the school setting or participated in a school sanctioned extracurricular[†] activity

- a. Within 14 days prior to illness onset or a positive test result **OR**
- b. Within 10 days after illness onset or a positive test result

Standardized K-12 school-transmission definition

A subset of school-associated cases where the most likely place of exposure is determined to be the school setting or a school-sanctioned extracurricular activity.

Standardized K-12 school-associated cluster description:

Multiple cases comprising at least 10% of students, teachers, or staff within a specified core group* **OR** at least three (3) within a specified core group* meeting criteria for a school-associated COVID-19 case; with symptom onset or positive test result within 14 days of each other[§], **AND NO likely known epidemiologic link to a case outside of the school setting.**

* A “core group” includes but is not limited to extracurricular activity[†], cohort group, classroom, before/after school care, etc.)

† A school sanctioned extracurricular activity is defined as a voluntary activity sponsored by the school or local education agency (LEA) or an organization sanctioned by the LEA. Extracurricular activities include, but are not limited to, preparation for and involvement in public performances, contests, athletic competitions, demonstrations, displays, and club activities.

§ For onset, use symptom onset date whenever available. If symptom onset date is unknown or if a case is asymptomatic, use specimen collection date for the first specimen that tested positive. The 14-day period refers to 14 days before the date of first symptom onset or first positive test sample.

Standardized K-12 school-associated outbreak description:

Multiple cases comprising at least 10% of students, teachers, or staff, within a specified core group* **OR** at least three (3) cases within a specified core group* meeting criteria for a probable or confirmed school-associated COVID-19 case with symptom onset or positive test result within 14 days of each other[§]; who were not identified as close contacts of each other in another setting (i.e. household) outside of the school setting; **AND** epidemiologically linked in the school setting or a school-sanctioned extracurricular activity.

Potential levels of transmission based on [CDC Community Transmission Risk Guidance](#)

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