

K-12 Outbreak/Cluster Reporting Messaging

MDHHS and local health departments continue to get questions from media related to K-12 Outbreak/Cluster reporting. While MDHHS messaging on this has not changed, we did want to send language to local health departments to assist you in any media inquiries and assure a consistent message between the state and local health departments. Critically, we point out why we do not distinguish outbreaks and clusters (ability to identify epi links based on capacity to perform case investigation, participation from parents/schools) and why comparisons between geographies may not be appropriate.

MDHHS is utilizing the latest definitions for measuring outbreaks and clusters of COVID-19 in K-12 schools in accordance with the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists standards: [CSTE-Standardized-COVID-19-K-12-School-Surveillance-Guidance-for-Classification-of-Clusters-and-Outbreaks.pdf](#). Surveillance case definitions are often modified over time as the epidemic evolves and more evidence are collected to better inform future surveillance practices and standards.

*The new definition from CSTE has separate criteria for defining an outbreak and a cluster associated with a school setting while the previous definition **ONLY** included an outbreak definition. Outbreaks rely on confirming exposure linkages between cases while clusters account for school cases where a definitive exposure linkage has not been established. The previous outbreak definition threshold was 2 cases, while the new outbreak definition requires 3 or more cases OR having multiple cases comprising at least 10% of a core school group.*

Previously, MDHHS reported out school related outbreaks. Utilizing the new surveillance definition, MDHHS now reports both outbreaks and clusters combined in one number. There are numerous barriers to identifying epidemiological or exposure linkages between cases, including: limited resources to perform in depth case investigations at the local level, the depth in which schools participate in the case investigation process, and also whether the public engages with investigators in the case investigation process. These limitations may also vary over time and by geography, making comparisons across jurisdictions difficult.

MDHHS also wants to recognize the challenges in shifting to a new surveillance definition during the start of the school year while the State was experiencing an increase in cases. The timing of local adoption of new definitions may not always occur in unison, especially when cases are increasing and local resources are challenged.

As a side note, schools should continue to report school associated cases to their communities as required by the [Reporting of Confirmed and Probable Cases of COVID-19 at Schools](#) Epidemic Order. Nothing has changed with the Epidemic Order that would impact on reporting or counting K-12 cases and outbreaks.