



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Joint Statement from Health Directors Share NC DHHS Toolkit Updates

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services announced changes to the StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit on Thursday, February 10 that take effect on Monday, February 21st. The full toolkit can be found here: <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/164/open>.

The major change to school protocols is that contact tracing is no longer required and students exposed to COVID-19 will not need to be excluded from school for a quarantine period as long as they have no symptoms. Students who are COVID positive or have COVID-like symptoms will continue to be excluded from school.

State officials note the following factors as the reason why changes were needed:

- *Emergence of variants with shorter incubation periods and rapid transmission.*
- *People with infections are most contagious prior to symptom onset and during the first few days of illness.*
- *Larger number of asymptomatic and less severe cases due, in part, to more immunity from vaccination and past infection.*
- *Many infections are never identified by public health agencies because people with asymptomatic or mild cases may not get tested and due to the increasing use of "over-the-counter" at-home tests.*
- *Widespread virus and low rates of case and contact identification limit effectiveness of contact tracing to reduce transmission.*

Region 4 Health Directors (Alexander, Cabarrus, Catawba, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly, and Union) wish to use this opportunity to thank NC DHHS leaders for listening to feedback from epidemiologists and health directors and sharing this update as wide-spread contact tracing has become less effective in our communities during the recent surges in cases from both the Delta and Omicron variants.

Public health staff have long identified struggles in people answering phones, sharing information, and returning calls as barriers that limited contact tracing's effectiveness at preventing spread.

“Our communities are almost 24 months into this pandemic and our residents understand what resources they have access to in order to keep their families safe. These continue to be vaccines, masking, testing when symptomatic or exposed and staying home when sick,” shared Jennifer McCracken, Catawba County Public Health Director.

“As public health leaders in the local community, we will continue to advocate for policies that support our children and their families. We feel these changes strike a balance that we need at the local level at this time,” continued Stanly County Public Health Director David Jenkins.

Health Directors in the region stress the importance of staying informed and using all the tools you can to keep families safe.

“All of our schools have done an amazing job navigating really unimaginable conditions over the past two years. We are hopeful these updates provide practical strategies to keeping kids in school and healthy,” stated Alyssa Harris, Rowan County Public Health Director.

Schools have been given options for how they notify parents of an exposure. Check with your school system to learn more as the toolkit provides flexibility on how this is done.

NC Public Health Region Four (4) is comprised of the following counties:
Alexander, Cabarrus, Catawba, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly, and Union.