

OPINION:

Board of Education *must stand* **AGAINST** *weak* **LEADERSHIP**

Walking into a school has become more dangerous each year. The highest number of school shootings happened in 2019. This year, a different type of danger threatens students: COVID-19.

In light of rising cases on a local and national scale, the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department and the USD 497 Board of Education must work together to prioritize the health of the district's staff and students.

The school board discussed the county's growing positivity rate at a Nov. 12 emergency meeting. At that time, this positivity rate had climbed to 13.8%, jumping four percentage points in two weeks. This placed the county in the orange tier of the health department's Smart & Safe School Reopening Guidelines.

Originally, the health department recommended all in-person learning, athletics and extracurricular activities stop while the county was in this zone. However, mere hours before the meeting began, the health department changed this guidance. The revised recommendation now allows all school functions to continue in orange, with the exception of certain "high-risk" activities.

In a video released in early October, Superintendent Anthony Lewis agreed with

the original guidance, vowing to end in-person learning "100%" if the county moved into orange.

At the Nov. 12 meeting, Lewis changed course, saying "we've learned new information" since the video was released.

By agreeing with the health department's sudden changes, Lewis and the school board are following instead of leading. They're not standing by their words and are accepting the ineffective leadership of the health department. This support shows that they would rather have students learn in-person in unnecessarily dangerous situations than face backlash about their decisions.

The health department defines basketball and wrestling as high-risk activities but notes they are able to be modified to comply with social distancing guidelines. All sports in the winter season have been approved by the Kansas State High School Activities Association to begin competitions Dec. 1.

Anyone familiar with wrestling should immediately question how this can safely take place during a pandemic. Every wrestler faces several opponents during each competition, coming in close contact with many students from other areas. This environment, which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention categorize

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as the highest risk, is perfect for the spread of COVID-19.

Supporters of in-person learning have repeatedly told the board that they have seen their students' mental health benefit from attending classes in the school building. While the social aspect of in-person classes may boost a student's mental health, the risks do not outweigh the rewards.

During the school year, the county health department has linked eight outbreaks to K-12 activities. Those outbreaks have not resulted in any deaths, but they show the district's safety measures are not stopping the spread of COVID-19 in schools.

With the holiday season and colder weather upon us, officials are again stressing the importance of social distancing.

Lawrence Memorial Hospital officials released a statement Nov. 17 announcing they

are preparing for a 500% increase of COVID-19 inpatients by Dec. 1.

This is a critical time for our community's health. The health department should do everything it can to encourage the public to stop the spread of this virus. However, it is not.

Douglas County should not be led by departments that change policy just to avoid potential criticism. That behavior is irresponsible and immature and puts our entire community at a higher risk for contracting and spreading COVID-19.

Those in charge of our safety need to take a cautious approach when it comes to our health. Our school board should not bend with wavering guidelines. Lee's Summit, Blue Valley and other surrounding districts that have chosen to move to online learning and value safety over backlash. Lawrence must follow suit.

EARLY OCTOBER

Superintendent Dr. Anthony Lewis plans to go fully remote if county enters orange zone.

Lewis agrees to stay hybrid in orange tier after learning new info.

NOVEMBER 17

LMH announces preparations for a 500% increase in COVID-19 patients by Dec. 1.

NOVEMBER 12

Health department changes recommendation to allow hybrid learning during orange zone.

DECEMBER 1

Winter sports competitions allowed to begin by KSHSAA.