

Kirsten Stewart:

It's been said that the world has reached peak disinfection as we work to rid our homes and workplaces of any trace of the COVID-19 virus. Truly, the pandemic has heightened everyone's interest in the many germ-fighting tools we have at our disposal. But public schools have always prioritized disease prevention, whether we're talking about common colds and the flu or vaccine-preventable illnesses, such as whooping cough. So, what can our neighborhood schools teach us about the strategies that work best? How is COVID-19 different? And what extra precautions are schools taking as we look to resume classes in the fall?

Kirsten Stewart:

I recently caught up with Canyons District Nurse, Jennifer Gerrard, and BJ Weller, the Responsive Services Director for Canyons District, the department which, among other things, works to maintain safe, healthy learning environments in our schools.

Kirsten Stewart:

So, let's start with what schools do every year in the name of disease prevention. I'm going to start with you, Jen. I know that we enforce state vaccination requirements and we have sick rooms in our schools. We teach good hand hygiene. But, you know, what are some of the things parents might not know about what a school nurse does on a daily basis?

Jennifer Gerrard:

On a daily basis in the school setting in a normal year, we're going to monitor [students'] immunizations because that's going to help prevent some of the communicable diseases that we're already familiar with and that we're already vaccinating against. We're also going to do things such as teaching hand hygiene to the students. So, we do formal classes and informal classes. We have teachers that are talking about it frequently. We have hand sanitizer in the school routinely.

Jennifer Gerrard:

Other things that we're doing, we have a health room located in every [school's front] office. Those health rooms are a place where children can go and lay down or rest if they have a fever or they're sick [while] we're contacting parents and trying to find somebody who can pick them up and take them home and help them feel better. That would be a typical school year.

Kirsten Stewart:

You work with kids to administer medicines that kids need throughout the day, too, right?

Jennifer Gerrard:

Sure. [crosstalk 00:02:07] Yeah. And that's kind of something where we would follow along with a healthcare plan or meet their needs if they already have a medical diagnosis that impacts their school day. So, we make those accommodations as well, and we help parents. We're sort of the liaison between the parents and the doctor and the school. So, we kind of help coordinate everybody and get everybody on the same page-

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay.

Jennifer Gerrard:

... to keep those kids safe.

Kirsten Stewart:

So, what then is different and unique about this year? What extra safety precautions do we have in place?

Jennifer Gerrard:

We're in the middle of a communicable disease (laughs). So, extra safety precautions. I know that they've made adjustments to the ventilation system, they've done things with the filtration systems there. And I can't really speak to that. But, in addition to that, we're finding ways to maintain distance. So, we're trying to do some of that physical distancing as much as we can. They have made changes to lunch schedules and how the lunch room is situated so that kids aren't directly sitting across from each other when they're not wearing their masks. We've implemented the mask mandate. We're asking everybody to wear the mask.

Jennifer Gerrard:

We're really just upping our game on sanitation. So, things that we were already doing, we're doing more of or we're doing it more frequently. We are going to be having kids hand sanitize more. We're going to be having them wash their hands more. School nurses are hoping to really get involved in their schools and be there to kind of teach some of that hand hygiene practice. And, um ... I'm sure I'm leaving a lot of things out. We're doing a lot of different things right now.

Kirsten Stewart:

Right. Yeah, there's a whole lot of those, I think. And then you mentioned lunch rooms, but one of the things that I'd heard is that they would assign seats also, right, during lunch-

Jennifer Gerrard:

Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

... for the purposes of contact tracing?

Jennifer Gerrard:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kirsten Stewart:

In the classrooms, too, right? We'll have students assigned to desks?

Jennifer Gerrard:

Yes, yes, exactly. So, if we have a seating chart for as many events as we can within the school day, then that will help us identify the people that were exposed if somebody were to test positive.

Kirsten Stewart:

Great. One of the ways, of course, one of the more powerful ways that we can prevent the spread of COVID is to wear face coverings, you know. And, as a global community, we deployed and investigated a lot of complicated fixes to this pandemic. Right? But, you know, there really is the one simple achievable solution of wearing face coverings. So, avoiding any confusion about opposition on face coverings, what are we asking of our employees and our students and our visitors to this building?

BJ Weller:

Please just wear a face covering (laughs). I mean it's really that simple, right? We're a Canyons family, and we care about each other. And it might be a little inconvenient. It might be a little itchy. But at the end of the day, if it saves lives, why would we not do that? And accommodations are made available to staff and students who may have a sensitivity or a sensory or a medical or a mental health condition. And we're working through that process.

BJ Weller:

But if we're able to help somebody, I think it's our responsibility to do that. Canyons District has created three learning options for families: in-person, online, or parent-directed district-supported. And if a family really feels strongly that they do not want to send their child to school with a mask, then we just invite them to choose one of those other two options. Because again, there will be more risk for everybody if we're not following through on this health requirement of wearing a face covering.

Jennifer Gerrard:

And I should mention, if we sound a little muffled, it's because we're all wearing face masks. Right?

BJ Weller:

Yes, we are.

Jennifer Gerrard:

(laughs)

BJ Weller:

Yes, we are. I wanted to add one thing to what Jen said a few minutes ago because I don't think they give themselves enough credit. Our school nurses are working night and day to not only train our front office staff on how to use a Glucagon pen or an EpiPen, first aid, and CPR, [but] they'll [also] be training each front office on what do we do when somebody comes in and they have symptoms, right? Because we know that there's still going to be the general cold. People will still have sinus infections.

BJ Weller:

So, number one, we're asking people, please do not come to school or work if you're not feeling well and you have symptoms. Right? Please just stay home until you don't have symptoms, or go get checked by your doctor. But number two, if you do have symptoms at school and you have to come down, our nurses are training the front office on is this an injury or is this symptom related? Do they need to be isolated? Or do we just need to have a secondary location for individuals to wait? Or if they're coming down to get their medication, you know, what is all of that going to look like?

BJ Weller:

And then they're providing additional protective equipment to the front office in the form of goggles, higher rated masks, because if they're dealing with students who have symptoms, again, we want to then increase their protective factors. So, they are working tirelessly not only to provide facts to individuals so that they can maybe reduce some of the anxiety or fear that they're feeling, but to then provide ongoing supports through this whole process.

Kirsten Stewart:

What about physical distancing? One of the things that I understand that we're doing is to reduce sort of intermingling in the halls and keep students kind of well spaced. We'll be doing something with, you know, like, the lining of the halls with directional signage-

BJ Weller:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kirsten Stewart:

... and that kind of thing. Right? Anything else? Uh, we talked about the lunch rooms. But... How are we handling recesses and that kind of thing?

BJ Weller:

So, recess, as far as we know, is going to be about the same, though schedules have been altered. So, you have fewer students out at the same time. But the definition for a close contact exposure means that an individual was within six feet for a duration of 15 minutes or longer. And that, again, that's the definition for a close contact exposure.

BJ Weller:

And so, when they are outside, they do not need to wear their face covering. They can take that off. But they need to play, get fresh air, right, continue not only getting exercise but practicing good social skills, problem solving skills.

Jennifer Gerrard:

Yeah.

BJ Weller:

And it's good for them. It's really important. It's critical, really, to take that time to be out there. And if the schools can follow that, and then when the kids come back, wash their hands, you know, use hand sanitizer to disinfect, then that'll be even better. Really, that's what we're asking our teachers to do when the students come back in. Give them that opportunity. Use soap and water as much as possible. That's more effective than the sanitizer.

Jennifer Gerrard:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BJ Weller:

Right, Nurse Jen?

Jennifer Gerrard:

That's correct.

BJ Weller:

(laughs)

Jennifer Gerrard:

[crosstalk 00:09:23] ...But when you can't use, when you don't have access to soap and water, then that sanitizer will have to do.

BJ Weller:

Yeah.

Kirsten Stewart:

And, what is it, do 20 seconds, right?

Jennifer Gerrard:

20 seconds.

Kirsten Stewart:

Do you guys remember?

Jennifer Gerrard:

Yep, 20 seconds. So, that's, you know, the ABC's twice. What is it? Happy Birthday twice or Twinkle Twinkle Little Star twice. Any of those will get that 20 second time. And it's, it's scrubbing everything, scrubbing your fingertips, getting in-between your fingers. Just making sure that you're covering all the surfaces with soap and then rinsing really well with water.

Kirsten Stewart:

And I just got off the phone with our transportation director, too, and we were kind of talking about some of the safeguards that are in place for our buses. And they're really quite similar to what we have for our schools. Right?

BJ Weller:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kirsten Stewart:

I mean, folks will be required to wear a face covering. And then I think they'll have sanitizer available for students to use as they board the bus. They'll be doing cleanings between routes. And then after the end of the school day, they also, if possible, use disinfectants as we will with our classrooms. So-

BJ Weller:

Yeah.

Kirsten Stewart:

So, this is another area that is not necessarily foreign to schools, right, the handling of suspected or confirmed cases of a transmittable disease. Right? Talk about how we'll be approaching this with COVID-19. What's unique about this year?

Jennifer Gerrard:

What's unique about this year is that in other outbreaks of communicable diseases, we typically have a vaccine. So, we have vaccine rates within schools, which is going to sort of give us a herd immunity in a sense. And so, that herd immunity is going to protect the most people. And then there are going to be a few that have an exemption for the vaccine. So, they don't have the vaccine.

Jennifer Gerrard:

So, if there's an outbreak, which ... And that number varies depending on the disease, so with measles it only takes one and that's an outbreak. There's varicella, then it's, like, five. So, there's ... it varies depending on what it is that we're dealing with. But students that have an exemption would be the ones that they need to quarantine and monitor and watch. And the students that are, that are vaccinated fully are able to continue to come to school. So, it's treated a little bit different, where this is communicable, but there isn't a vaccine option. So, everybody is essentially exempt from having immunity. So they're all treated that way and they would all need to quarantine after an exposure or isolate if they test positive.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay.

BJ Weller:

And what we know right now today as of this recording August 10th-

Jennifer Gerrard:

(laughs)

BJ Weller:

... is that an outbreak in a classroom is considered when three individuals have tested positive within a two-week timeframe. When there are two confirmed cases in a classroom, we'll send a letter home to the families within that class, not to the whole school, just in that class, to let them know that there have been a couple of confirmed cases and that we will be asking people to be more diligent. If it does reach that third case within that two week timeframe, then the whole classroom will need to quarantine for the two weeks. So, that would be considered an exposure or, excuse me, an outbreak.

BJ Weller:

And if we're thinking about the whole school, then 15 individuals testing positive would be considered an outbreak. And in collaboration with the local health department and our school board, a decision would be to close the school for the two week quarantine period.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay. And of course, one of the benefits of the learning options that we have available to parents in that case is that, you know, all teachers would be pushing their instruction onto Canvas, right, which is through the online learning system that we use. And so, no matter where our student is learning, they're going to be on track with their peers. They're going to be able to access the lessons that they need to access and the support that they need to access to continue learning even during a situation like this.

BJ Weller:

It's exactly right. As much as we can keep routines, procedures, relationship in place, the better. And so, if you have to quarantine for two weeks, all of our teachers should now have Canvas pages. They've been receiving training throughout the spring and now into the fall on how to provide that instruction. And students will not un-enroll from that class. They'll continue with their same teachers during that timeframe.

Kirsten Stewart:

What happens if someone, a parent, over the weekend, their child has symptoms, they take them in for some testing because they're concerned and then they find out that the child tests positive. Do they notify the school, or does the health department notify the school? How does that work?

BJ Weller:

Yes and yes.

Jennifer Gerrard:

(laughs)

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay. Okay.

BJ Weller:

So, we're [crosstalk 00:14:08], yeah, so we're asking, number one, if somebody has been tested and they have not received their results yet, please stay home. Right? Please do not come to school or work if you have symptoms. And if you're awaiting test results, please do not come. You should be quarantining. If you do receive information that you tested positive, please let your school office know. The health department will notify us, but they may not notify us in the same timeframe as a parent because of the caseload at the health department. So they may in the same day. I don't know. But we always just ask parents to let us know why their students are not in school. And this is no different.

Kirsten Stewart:

We talked about, you know, obviously how we're safeguarding the physical health of our employees and our students, but this pandemic has really been a traumatic experience for all of us. Right? I mean, talk about maybe some of the measures that we have in place to support wellness in general, emotional healing and mental health for our students and our employees.

BJ Weller:

You know, one of the really important facts I want to make sure we mention is that even before COVID, Canyon School District had planned to hire six additional school nurses because we saw the gap in

services that we could provide to students and staff and families in terms of wellness. Right? They're not just here to help give insulin shots and create healthcare plans. There's a lot that our school nurses can do to provide education and prevention focusing on the whole child, you know, eating better, getting adequate rest at night, looking at the snack guidelines that we provide to schools and to families. Right?

Kirsten Stewart:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BJ Weller:

But I think number one just as we focus on wellness, reminding everybody to be gentle with ourselves. Right? Get as much sleep as we can. That's healthy. Maybe not 15 hours, right, but get adequate rest. Eat healthy. Do everything you can to improve your immune system. And then just be mentally prepared when we come back with our students that many of our students have been in unsafe situations. Maybe some of our staff members have been in unsafe situations. And what I mean by that is domestic violence rates have increased significantly, even in our own county. And drug and alcohol use has increased in some areas in our county.

BJ Weller:

And just knowing some of those situations and whether it's been less structure in the home than maybe people are used to when they come to school. When everybody comes back, just be gentle with ourselves, with our students. Just know that people are here. There might be a lot of fear. There might be some anxiety. But work through that with your counselor, with, you know, with your school staff members, with your administrator.

BJ Weller:

If it really does become a struggle where you feel like you can't function, then reach out. We have an employee assistance program [that] offers free counseling, free supports to individuals. And it's okay. Anxiety is there to help protect us, and sometimes anxiety runs its own course and we start catastrophizing things in our end. And by talking to one of our school nurses to get the facts of the situation can bring that down, uh, bring our anxiety down to more manageable levels.

BJ Weller:

We always caution about the use or overuse of social media and to just check the references or the sources because there's a lot of misinformation out there, a lot of information that is geared toward inciting more anxiety and more fear. And, and that's hard for people, you know. So, I ... We're just saying, be mentally prepared. Take care of yourself. We do have counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses in our building focusing on wellness and prevention. And we do have professional services available if needed.

Kirsten Stewart:

Yeah. And of course, like, school administrators and counselors are also good resources as... We still have the SafeUT app, correct?

BJ Weller:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes.



Kirsten Stewart:

So, yeah, all great resources for anyone who's struggling and just needs a little extra help.

BJ Weller:

Yeah.

BJ Weller:

We've got this. We're all in this together.

BJ Weller:

We're going to get through it.

Jennifer Gerrard:

Right?

BJ Weller:

And, and we'll be stronger for it. And we'll learn from it. And I think in hindsight a year from now, we'll be more cognizant of healthier habits. We'll be more cognizant of better hygiene in schools (laughs).

Kirsten Stewart:

Sure.

BJ Weller:

I don't think we'll be complacent any longer.

Kirsten Stewart:

Yeah. And to all you parents out there, don't forget to get your flu shot (laughs).

BJ Weller:

Yes.

Jennifer Gerrard:

Yes.

BJ Weller:

Yes.

Kirsten Stewart:

I know where to get mine. All right. Well, thank you both for taking time today to chat. I really appreciate it.

BJ Weller:

Yeah, thank you for the opportunity. We're excited to see our students and staff back. And for all the parents, just know whether you choose at-home instruction or online or in-person, please feel free to utilize our wellness staff, whether that's our nurses, our counselors, social workers, psychologists. Responsive Services Department is here to ensure that each student is safe, healthy and ready to learn.

Kirsten Stewart:

Join us again for the next episode of Connect Canyons, a podcast sponsored by Utah's Canyons School District. If you have any comments for us, questions or ideas for topics you'd like us to explore, email us at [communications@canyonsdistrict.org](mailto:communications@canyonsdistrict.org). You can also follow us on Twitter at [@CanyonsDistrict](https://twitter.com/CanyonsDistrict). Today's show was edited by Andrew Reeser. If you liked this episode, please be sure to share it with a friend. I'm Kirsten Stewart, and this is Canyons School District.