

Testimony before the
Senate Education Committee

by

Lara K. Bors, Board of Education President, Unified School District 457

February 25, 2021

Senator Baumgardner:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee. My name is Lara Bors and I currently serve as the President of the USD 457 Board of Education in Garden City, Kansas. In my first job, I am a mother of two high school students.

I want to start by saying thank you for your interest in Kansas children and public education. To be clear, I believe it is very important for students to have the opportunity for in-person learning. The research has undoubtedly shown that the majority of our students learn the best when receiving in-person instruction. Just as everyone else, I wish for nothing more than for this pandemic to end and for us all to return to a more normal sense of living.

Today, I am testifying in opposition to SB 235. My first concern with this legislation is that this decision has been and should be made by local school boards who take into consideration what is appropriate in each school district given the local conditions.

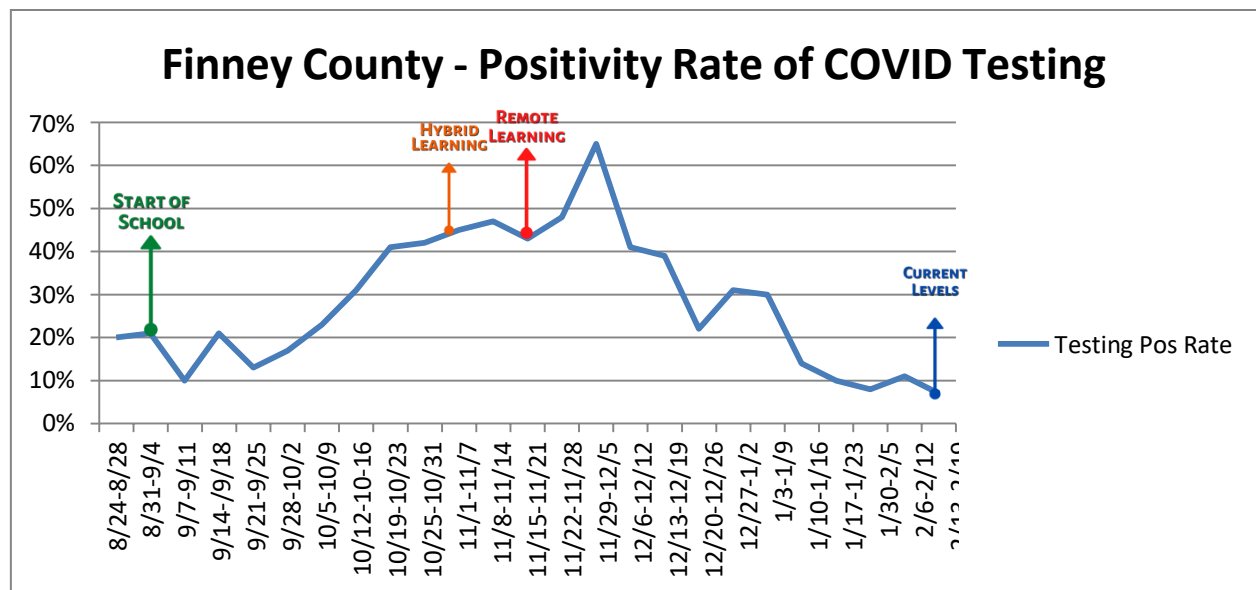
During the summer of 2020, Garden City Public Schools engaged approximately 200 stakeholders, including representatives from the local health department, in developing a plan for conducting school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan placed a priority on keeping things as normal as possible, while putting in place reasonable mitigation strategies to keep students, staff, and families safe. The plan is grounded in using local data and evidence to inform decisions about the level of operation employed each week.

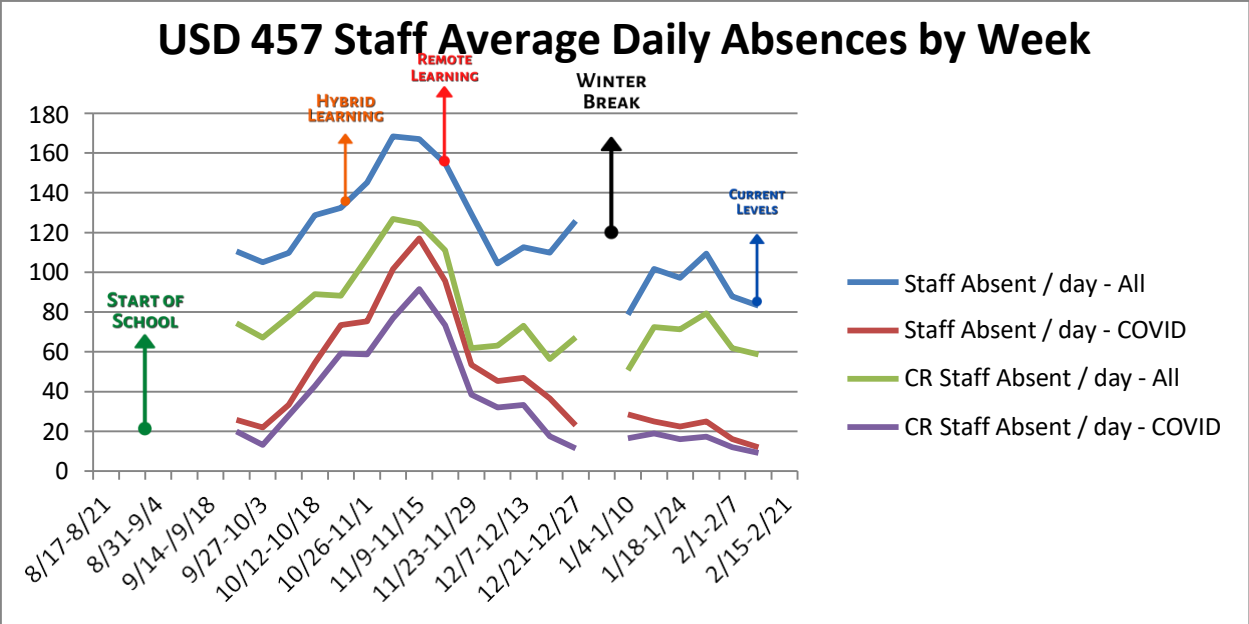
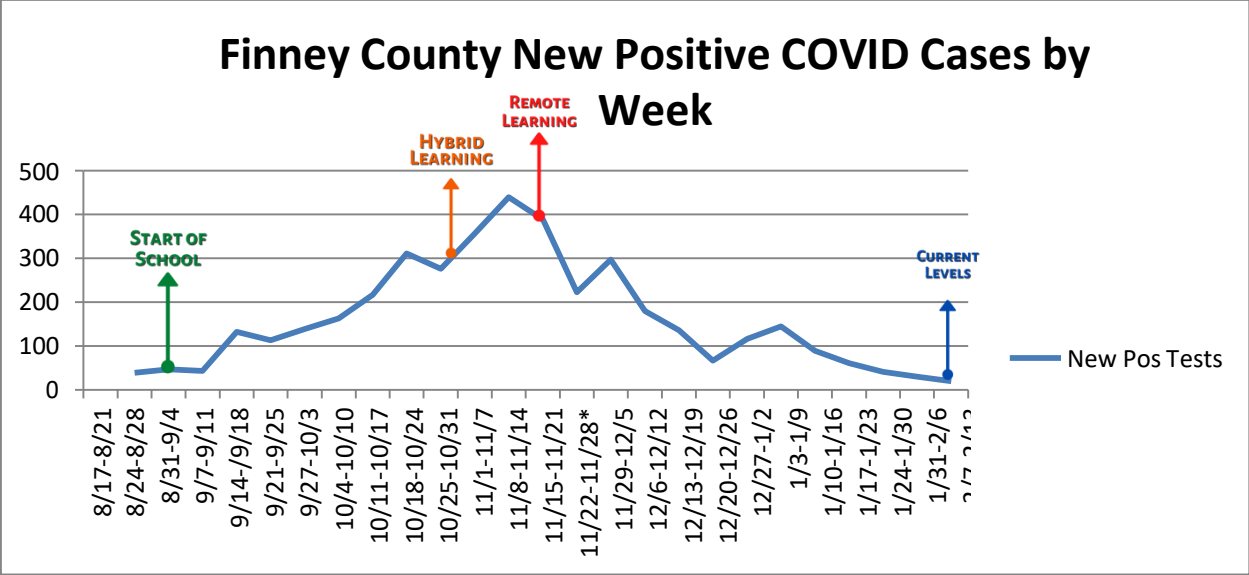
To illustrate my position I will detail the circumstances that have occurred in Garden City thus far in the pandemic. Finney County experienced a surge in positive cases in late April and early May of 2020. As of August 31st, the first day of school in USD 457, Finney County had recorded 1,900 positive COVID-19 cases which, when adjusted for population, was one of the highest case rates in Kansas. The week prior the positivity rate was 13%, the lowest point in the previous nine weeks, which had an overall average of 20%. Although these numbers were higher when compared to most other counties in Kansas, the decision was made to begin school with in-person learning because of a close partnership with our local health department and closely monitored mitigation strategies. The district continued with full-time, in-person learning for 10 weeks. However, by early November, COVID-19 positive cases in the community almost doubled, increasing by 1,797, and the district made the decision to move to Hybrid Learning. COVID-19 cases in our community continued to rise, increasing by another 827 within the two week time period that we utilized Hybrid Learning. Because of a consistent positivity rate of 41% or higher in Finney County and for the safety of not only our staff and students but for our community, USD 457 made the decision to transition to Remote Learning in late November through the end of 2020. Immediately after the holiday break the district returned to in-person learning. The number of new positive COVID-19 cases and the positivity rate in our

community has improved considerably since the first of January. Last week the positivity rate reached the lowest level experienced in Finney County at 7%. The district has maintained in-person learning for all grade levels for seven weeks since the return to school in January. Garden City Public Schools continues to work closely with the Finney County Health Department in monitoring the current conditions and making any necessary adjustments.

As you know, there are many local factors that must be considered when determining the appropriate method for conducting school during a pandemic. One of the most critical is the availability of teachers and all other staff. Every position in the school is important in creating a safe and positive environment for students to learn. Garden City Public Schools employs approximately 1,250 people. During our most difficult week this Fall the district averaged 117 employees absent from work due to COVID-19. This included positive cases, quarantined employees, and those with symptoms pending testing. Substitute fill rates were below 50% and one week fell as low as 37%. It should be obvious, that as much as everyone wanted students to have in-person learning all year it was not possible during that period for Garden City.

The following charts demonstrate some of the key information that guided the decisions in USD 457.





As I previously stated, my first job was a mother to two high school students, which may lead you to wonder as to my second job – a lawyer. I would also like to point you to Article Six, Section 2, subsection (a) of the Kansas Constitution, “The legislature shall provide for a state board of education which shall have general supervision of public schools, educational institutions and all the educational interests of the state.... The state board of education shall perform such other duties as may be provided by law.” This issue should certainly fall under this category. In the event that you disagree that this should be left up to *local* boards of education (authorized under Art. 6, Sec. 5 of the Kansas Constitution), then it should be left up to the *state* board of education. This was certainly something contemplated when the legislature adjourned in 2020 and required Governor Kelly to obtain a majority vote of the State Board of Education to delay the start of school and/or seek the closing of school for the 2020-2021 school year.

The State Board of Education has taken their call of duty to protect the students of Kansas seriously with their Navigating Change and Navigating Next documents. They have called upon some of the best minds with the educators of this state in creating these documents.

It is ironic that this bill is being heard this week – National Public Schools Week. I would encourage you to allow the State Board of Education to follow their constitutional directive to supervise the public schools of this state as they move forward. They are in the best position to make the necessary adjustments as information regarding this virus is made known to us because, even a year later, information is changing on a daily basis and changes must be made as nimbly as possible.

Thank you again for your attention to Kansas children and to our public schools. I would suggest your work would be best served in supporting our public schools with the resources necessary to help our students and families succeed. Please leave local decisions to local school boards.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Lara K. Bors