

**Cigna K-12 School Reopening Podcast  
Transcript  
August 2020**

**Dorsey Hopson 00:00**

Welcome to Cigna's COVID-19 series designed to help our clients understand the latest information surrounding COVID-19, and how Cigna is supporting our clients and customers during this uncertain time. My name is Dorsey Hopson, Cigna's National K-12 Lead, and former Superintendent of Shelby County Schools in Memphis, Tennessee.

**Dorsey Hopson 00:23**

I am pleased to present today's focus topic, K-12: Returning to School. I am joined by my colleague, Dr. Laura Clapper, Cigna Market Medical Executive, and former school board member. As an M.D. and Pediatric Specialist, we are delighted to have her join this podcast. Together, we look forward to sharing the answers to some of the most often asked questions on this topic.

**Dorsey Hopson 00:49**

So, Dr. Clapper let's start with a question top of mind for all administrators, teachers, students and their families: Dr. Clapper, for those students planning in person classes, how can this be done as safely as possible?

**Dr. Laura Clapper 01:02**

That's an excellent question, Dorsey, and one that's been on everyone's mind, especially quite recently. Schools play an important role in a student's educational achievement, health and well-being. Working with local health officials, and with parents, caregivers, school have an important role in slowing the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the COVID-19, while protecting students, teachers, and staff, and ensuring students have a safe and healthy learning environment.

**Dorsey Hopson 01:35**

So, Dr. Clapper, what do we know about COVID-19 and children as it relates to infection rates?

**Dr. Laura Clapper 01:41**

COVID-19 is a newly identified disease caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2. Scientists are still learning about how it spreads, how it affects children, and what role children may play in its spread. Limited data about COVID-19 and children suggests that children are less likely to get COVID-19 than adults. And when they do get COVID-19, they generally have less serious illness than adults.

**Dr. Laura Clapper 02:06**

Common symptoms of COVID-19 among children include: fever, cough, runny nose, sore throat, headache, body ache and diarrhea. Many children may have mild or no symptoms. As of July 21, 2020, 6.6% of reported COVID-19 cases, and less than 0.1% of COVID-19-related deaths, are among children

and adolescents less than 18 years of age in the United States. While uncommon, death and rare illness such as multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children, otherwise known as MIS-C may occur.

**Dorsey Hopson** 02:44

Dr. Clapper that's great information. I know another thing on top of mind for many parents is deciding whether to send their kid back to school for class, in-class instruction. Tell me some of the most important factors parents should be thinking about as a way that difficult decision.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 03:01

Choosing whether or not to send your child back to school can be difficult and very personal to each family. When weighing decisions about your child returning to school, it is important to consider your family's unique needs and situation and your comfort level with the steps your school is taking to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 03:21

Some considerations may include the specific risks to members of your household if a child were to become infected in school, as well as access to school meal programs, social services, extended day childcare services, and other extracurricular activities, social emotional support from peers and educators and school transportation.

**Dorsey Hopson** 03:46

Let me switch gears a little bit here. Dr. Clapper. What should a parent look for in a school's plans to reduce risk?

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 04:06

As a parent, I think it's important to review the local school or school district reopening plans to understand the steps they're taking to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and support the educational goals of their students. Schools can implement strategies across four key areas to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 04:26

The first one is promoting behaviors that reduce spread. That would be social distancing, washing hands wearing face cloth, otherwise known as masks.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 04:38

Two: maintain healthy environments. So, ensuring proper ventilation, opening doors or windows when it's possible. Cleaning and disinfecting, frequently touched surfaces, which may be desks or other areas in the classroom that have a lot of contact or crowds.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 04:59

Maintaining healthy operations, such as staggering schedules, keeping students in small groups, having pods or cohorts.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 05:08

And number four is preparing when someone gets sick.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 05:12

Schools and communities with higher levels of COVID-19 will likely take more steps to prevent the spread of the disease. Parents can check on the CDC's Consideration for Schools for examples of some of the steps schools may be taking as part of their reopening strategy. Parents and caregivers might also be interested in learning how the school plans to support the emotional well-being of their students, both in person and virtually.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 05:39

I think this is really important because we're all going through a changing time. There's been grief on how the school year ended and concerns about how it's starting. And I don't think that schools or parents and families can think about the emotional well-being too much. It's really something, talking about, naming it. I think it's really important.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 06:03

Schools can also work with the state, local and territorial and tribal health officials to determine whether how to implement these considerations to meet the unique needs and circumstances of their local community. Implementation should be guided by what is feasible, practical, acceptable and tailored to the needs of each community.

**Dorsey Hopson** 06:23

Thank you for that, Dr. Clapper. As you know, I have several friends who are still superintendents around the country, and I know one of the most important things that are keeping them up at night is what happens if there's an outbreak at school during the school year. Can you address the risk of an outbreak in a school and what should happen if it happens?

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 06:42

That's a really important question because we know that infectious diseases do happen at schools. We all hope that all the measures that are being taken for COVID-19 that we'll have less flu this year, but we do have outbreaks in school and so it's important to think about this and be prepared.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 07:02

Evidence and information about transmission, the way germs move from one person to another with COVID-19 with children is relatively limited. Evidence from other countries suggests that most

pediatric cases resulted from children becoming infected by a family member. The more individuals a person interacts with, so the number of people is important, and the longer the interaction, so how long the interaction occurred, the higher the risk of COVID-19 spread. So that's why you see these strategies of keeping children in one classroom and having one teacher and not having them change classrooms. Or in high schools, they're talking about how to do modules and different things like that, to reduce the number of other students that the students are exposed to.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 07:55

The risk of getting COVID-19 is also influenced by the intensity of transmission in your community. So, school districts need to make a very local decision based on their local public health department guidance, as well as what's happening with the COVID-19 infections in their area. Their state, local, tribal and territorial health department website should provide information about the spread of COVID-19 in your area. If your child or a member of your family has been diagnosed with COVID-19, please follow the CDC guidelines and stay home until the criteria to discontinue home isolation has been met.

**Dorsey Hopson** 08:34

Dr. Clapper how does the risk vary across elementary schools as opposed to high schools? Are there different risks associated with the different bands of students in those schools?

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 08:49

When we think about it, the risk does vary. In elementary classes where students tend to be in one classroom, the strategies to reduce risk can be things like splitting days. I've seen different districts doing things like splitting half days, alternating days or doing different things and combining it with classrooms. So, there's different combinations, but you're starting with one intact cohort.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 09:17

As you get to middle school and high school, and students traditionally change classrooms, you see, there's a lot more. There's the social part of high school is so important. There's team sports. There's other ways that people are exposed to a lot of different students in the classroom. So, going back to a previous question where you're talking about the number of people you're exposed to, and the intensity, high school has both those aspects. You're in contact with many more students, and you're having intensity of activities, things like plays and sport practice and other kinds of things. Labs where you might be right next to each other. So, I think that high schools are really being challenged on how can they provide academic excellence and engage the students and be on track for AP, AP testing and things like that, and at the same time, keep the students safe.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 10:15

And I do think it's a very local decision and planning and strategy. So, parents really need to be talking to the school districts and know what the plan is and be involved in bringing any concerns forward to the to the school district.

**Dorsey Hopson** 10:32

That's excellent feedback, Dr. Clapper. Let me switch gears here a little bit. School reopening is triggering a lot of anxiety for school staff, students and faculty. What advice do you have for managing the stress of reopening and going back to school?

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 10:48

There are several key strategies to reduce stress. Number one is talking about it. Being transparent about it, having an open conversation and acknowledging that stress that people feel. Some family feel stressed just from going back to school and you don't know what to expect, and what's the new teacher going to be like. But this is a whole new level, because there's new procedures, there's new drop off, or maybe how the transportation works is different. And so, I think there's a lot to really talk about in terms of the unknowns what the concerns are.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 11:26

So, I think that's important. I think the parent needs to be talking with the school district, the family, parent, caregiver need to talk with as a family. I'm a big believer of family meetings, and this is a perfect topic to sit down and really kind of go through planning and talking about what they know and how, really how does it how your family is going to deal with going back to school.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 11:51

Number two is increased your child's and family's wellness and self-care activities. This is a great time to really say what are we doing in terms of being healthy, eating healthy, exercise. I always recommend that families plan activity together. So, plan a hike or walk together. Do different things that are family activities or include exercise or activity. That's really important.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 12:22

And another area that I think families can work on is having a good bedtime. That people's schedules may have gotten off with the COVID-19 shelter in place or and then you have summer, and so trying to plan and get people on a regular routine and going to bed so you can get up in time and prepare for everything. Make sure you have your mask on going to school is going to be really important.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 12:48

And number three is recognize the stress and learn how to manage it. Even young children can learn to self-calm, focus, take deep breaths. These are important skills, they are kind of basic mindfulness, and really working as your family, with your family to take a couple minutes to practice that will help your child as we go through so many, I think, unknowns, anxiety producing situations really learning those kind of more, as a pediatrician, I would call self-soothing skills. Really being able to self-calm.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 13:25

And while reopening may present challenges for all of us, students with disabilities may experience these challenges to a greater extent than their peers. They may be more at risk for health reasons. They may be more concerned about, they tend to go in and out of classrooms, depending on their individualized education plan. And they may be, you know, disproportionately affected by changes in their education.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 13:51

So, what should schools and families plan for? I think it's going to take working together, teamwork and being flexible. Thinking through what's the best for the child or students to both in terms of their health and their academic achievement, and for their family and for how can we make it work. I've always been impressed by how well schools and families can work together to help students achieve their best. And so, I think this is going to take on take from all of us, how can we meet the needs of students with disabilities.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 14:30

And I think I just ask everyone who's in that, in that situation, to really be a part with their needs are their students, what they're going through, if they have needs that the student school needs to work with them on, because there needs to be an open conversation. Working with the school district teacher to review options for your child regarding the risk, as well of the IEP or individualized education plan is in place, is a good start.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 14:58

Other suggestions would be talking to other parents, visiting classroom ahead of time, practicing the drop off and handoff for reduced the first day anxieties.

**Dorsey Hopson** 15:09

Thank you, Dr. Clapper. That's very useful information. I know that, you know, teachers are already a stressed-out group according to the data, and I can only imagine how you know returning to the classroom, or doing online instruction in this environment will further exacerbate stress and anxiety. So, I appreciate that information.

**Dr. Clapper** 15:28

Thank you, Dorsey. Now, I'd like to turn to you to discuss some of the topic of academic achievement. At first I want to acknowledge your background. You're currently Cigna's National K through 12 Lead. And before coming to Cigna, you were superintendent of the Shelby County Schools. Clearly your experience makes you eminently qualified to discuss this topic.

**Dr. Clapper** 15:49

So, Dorsey, as schools reopen, the setting will look different for staff and students, whether in person or remote. What are some of the learning challenges schools should be aware of?

**Dorsey Hopson** 16:00

Thank you, Dr. Clapper. I think a couple of challenges come to mind. First, it's going to be difficult for teachers to differentiate instruction in a virtual or in-person setting. And what I mean by that is a classroom typically contains students at all learning levels. And to address the diverse student needs, teachers use multiple instructional strategies. Strategies could include students working in small groups, or one-on-one direct instruction. I think it's going to be challenging to implement all the different instructional strategies if students are online or in person following CDC recommendations. This may have a significant impact on teaching and learning and educational outcomes. So, I think schools should think about how to address the achievement gaps that may result from Covid-related instructional limitations.

**Dorsey Hopson** 16:52

Also, I think students may experience, as you said Dr. Clapper, a heightened level of stress or anxiety which could impact student achievement. For example, a student who lives with his grandparents, say, may be concerned that he or she may become infected with COVID-19 at school, and then transmit the virus to his or her grandparents at home. Some students may experience anxiety because they are comfortable learning remotely but miss the social interaction at school. The added stress or anxiety resulting from COVID-19 could impact student's ability to learn and their overall well-being. I think school should work with professionals to develop strategies to identify support students who experience mental health challenges related to COVID.

**Dorsey Hopson** 17:37

And I will say too, Dr. Clapper, one of the things I'm excited about here at Cigna that we're working on, we're working to implement a school support line in three of our different markets where essentially teachers, parents, and anyone associated with the school community can call in and get real time support, if they have issues of stress and anxiety. So, that's something that we're excited about here. But I think it goes to one of the biggest concerns I have and I think that educators have around the country is how's all this going to impact student outcomes?

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 18:09

Thanks for sharing that. What advice do you have to cope with the added stress of teaching learning for in a different environment?

**Dorsey Hopson** 18:17

So, Dr. Clapper, you know I think teachers are one of our country's most valuable resources. I used to like to say they're the lifeblood of a school system. And what I learned during my time as superintendent is an effective teacher can literally change or save a student's life. Unfortunately, teaching is also a very stressful profession. I think, as we said, even before COVID-19 over 60% of teachers reported feeling some level of stress related to their job.

And the added uncertainty and anxiety around Covid, coupled with a change in classroom and instructional strategies, likely will lead to even more stress. So, I think to address the stress schools and teachers are going to have, schools set reasonable expectations for what success looks like this upcoming school year. Many teachers strive to be perfectionist. But in a post-Covid world, teachers are going to have to assume that things are going to go wrong, and that the unexpected will happen. I think discussing and accepting this reality on the front end may help ease some of the stress on the back end. Teachers who have high levels of stress or anxiety should also consider mental health counseling or coaching, which is often available through their EAP programs. Mental health counselors can help teachers design specific strategies to help cope with stress and anxiety.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 19:34

While reopening may present challenges for all, students with disabilities may experience these challenges to a greater extent than their peers, and may be disproportionately affected by changes in their education. What should schools and their families plan for?

**Dorsey Hopson** 19:50

That's a great question, Dr. Clapper. I think you spoke on earlier, too. I just think it's so important to be thinking about, you know, all of our students, particularly our most vulnerable ones at this point in time.

**Dorsey Hopson** 20:01

But I think it's going to be challenging to address the learning needs of many of our special needs students. Special needs students usually have IEPs, Individualized Education Plans. The IEPs lay out the accommodations necessary to support special needs students in a learning environment. Those accommodations could include, for example, more one-on-one time with teachers or teachers' aides. It could also include extracurricular support or activities for students that schools simply cannot do in a virtual environment or while following CDC guidelines. The inability to receive certain accommodations or services required by students IEP may have an impact on some student's ability to learn. So, schools and parents should be flexible, and look for innovative ways to support special needs students during this unprecedented time.

**Dr. Laura Clapper** 20:52

Thank you, Dorsey for the information and sharing your expert perspective. And thanks to all who joined the podcast today. Be sure to visit our Coronavirus Resource Center on Cigna.com for the latest information. Stay well. Wear your mask. And take care.



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**Citations:**

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From 7:17-7:25 -- Feldstein LR, Rose EB, Horwitz SM, Collins JP, Newhams MM, Son MB, Newburger JW, Kleinman LC, Heidemann SM, Martin AA, Singh AR. Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in US Children and Adolescents [published online ahead of print June 29, 2020]. *New Eng J Med.* DOI: 10.1056/NEJMoa2021680

From 18:37-18:45 -- Rajmil L. Role of children in the transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic: a rapid scoping review. *BMJ Paediatr Open.* 2020;4:e000722.