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UIL threatens sanctions if school districts and their fans don't follow COVID-19 guidelines

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Adhering to protocols is a must to continue to have a season, UIL says.



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Fans in the Argyle student section were following UIL guidelines during Friday's season-opening football game against Decatur, but others around the state weren't doing the same in Week 1. (Michael Ainsworth/Special Contributor) (Michael Ainsworth / Special Contributor)



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By [Greg Riddle](#)
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The University Interscholastic League is ramping up its efforts to get spectators to follow COVID-19 guidelines at games by threatening sanctions for those who don't comply. Meanwhile, local school districts are urging compliance — and patience — from fans and those involved in athletics.

The state's governing body for public schools, which said sanctions could come via local UIL district executive committees and/or the UIL state executive committee, also hinted at the possibility of shutting down sports if its protocols aren't followed.

The messaging comes after videos and photos were posted on social media from season-opening football games in Class 4A and below last week that showed fans neither wearing masks in the stands nor

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practicing proper social distancing.

The UIL released **updated COVID-19 risk mitigation guidelines**

Tuesday and sent an email to superintendents across the state that said adhering to those protocols is “critical.” **Sixteen states and the District of Columbia** have announced that they aren’t playing football this fall, and the UIL said in its email that “for students to have the opportunity to continue to compete in UIL activities this school year, we all must remain diligent in following these guidelines.”

“It’s a serious issue,” Celina football coach Bill Elliott said. “It’s not fun to wear a mask, but that’s what we’ve got to do if we want to play.

“We can police our kids and our support groups like the band, cheerleaders and drill team. It’s hard to police everybody in the stands.”



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BY



Elliott said Celina ISD has hired extra security and will remove fans from the game if they don't follow the guidelines. Celina has stickers in the stands marking designated seating for fans, but Elliott acknowledged that there were some issues with people congregating in areas and not having masks on during last week's home game against Melissa.

The ***Austin American-Statesman*** reported Tuesday that although in-person learning has not started for most Austin-area schools, public health officials have identified at least 25 coronavirus cases at primary and secondary schools — with nearly half of them linked to football strength and conditioning activities.

The UIL declined an interview

request from *The Dallas Morning News*.

It is about to become easier for the UIL to track the spread of the virus. School districts have to submit a COVID-19 data survey weekly starting next Tuesday to the Texas Education Agency.

The UIL's COVID-19 risk mitigation guidelines say that all employees, parents, visitors and students 10 years of age or older must wear face coverings or face shields upon entry to an area where UIL activities are being conducted and when not actively practicing or playing in the contest. The UIL is allowing a maximum of 50% capacity at games and said that the **executive order issued by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott** on July 3 applies to all UIL activities.

Abbott stated that everyone in Texas must wear a face covering when in an outdoor public space when it is not feasible to be at least 6 feet from anyone not living in the same

household. The only non-medical exceptions that would apply for fans at football games are when a congregating group of persons maintains at least 6 feet of social distancing or while a person is consuming food or drink.

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The TEA requires all school systems to develop a plan for mitigating COVID-19 spread in schools and to include UIL activities in their plan.

No Dallas ISD schools have played games yet, as the district has yet to announce a start date for athletic activities. But DISD athletic director Silvia Salinas expects there to be trial and error around the state when it comes to coronavirus guidelines.

“I think the media, other districts and coaches ... everybody needs to be considerate and patient with districts that are trying to roll out their athletic programs and events,” Salinas said. “It’s not going to be 100% perfect the first time we lay it out. We have the guidelines to go by, but it’s a lot easier when it’s on paper than to actually implement. There are going to be mistakes. This is the first time we’re all going through all of this.”

The spread of the virus — more than 600,000 cases and more than 12,000 deaths in Texas — has led to consequences for school districts that have tried to err on the side of caution and focus on the safety of their students by delaying the start of athletic activities. La Joya ISD canceled all fall sports, Dallas ISD has delayed its start, and San Antonio ISD announced Tuesday that its schools won’t begin in-person athletics until Oct. 5 (it could possibly be sooner if conditions improve in the area).

Multiple DISD schools have football

players considering transferring out of the district, coaches said. *The Monitor* in McAllen reported that players from all three La Joya ISD high schools — La Joya High, Juarez-Lincoln and Palmview — are attempting to transfer to Sharyland Pioneer and McAllen ISD schools in order to play this season and hopefully boost their odds of being recruited.

“We want our kids to stay with us,” Salinas said. “We’re going to have athletics. It’s not like we’re canceling everything. Just be patient.”

Salinas said Tuesday that she expects DISD to decide in the next day or two when the area’s largest school district will allow its 22 high schools to begin athletic activities.

Dallas ISD’s seven schools in 4A or 3A, and San Antonio ISD’s first-year football program (Class 4A YMLA) will be far behind those around the state who began fall practices for football and volleyball Aug. 3. San Antonio schools would not be able to

play football games until the last week of October if they stick with an Oct. 5 start date for workouts, while other UIL 6A and 5A schools can start practices Sept. 7 and can begin games Sept. 24-26.

“It will set us back quite awhile,” said Tony Benedetto, football coach at Class 5A Woodrow Wilson. “I think it’s confusing for our parents and our coaches. They don’t know what is safe and what isn’t safe. They see people around the state playing, or they see people around the county playing, and we’re not able to. It’s confusing.

“But we support our administration. They have more information than we do on the virus and what should or shouldn’t be done with athletics. I think our district and our county was put in a predicament because the UIL is allowing for sports, but our county has a lot of COVID cases.”

*Staff writer Joseph Hoyt
contributed to this report.*

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UIL LETTER TO SUPERINTENDEN

Superintendents,

UIL has posted updated **UIL
COVID-19 Risk Mitigation
Guidelines** on the UIL website,
effective September 1, 2020. These
changes are consistent with updates
recently posted to **TEA Guidance**.

As we continue into fall seasons, it is
critical that schools are diligent in
following these risk-mitigation
guidelines. Schools are still required
to follow Governor Abbott's
Executive Order GA-29 related to
face coverings. Schools may allow
spectators to attend contests up to a
maximum of 50% of a venue's

capacity, provided appropriate spacing as prescribed in the guidelines is maintained. UIL has posted some sample **pre-game** and **public address** announcements online that schools may use to help remind spectators of the guidelines to be followed.

In Texas, we are fortunate to be competing in fall seasons when so many states across the country are not. We greatly appreciate the efforts of school leaders to reduce the risk of spread of COVID-19. For students to have the opportunity to continue to compete in UIL activities this school year, we all must remain diligent in following these guidelines. Schools not following these guidelines are subject to sanctions by the local UIL District Executive Committee and/or UIL State Executive Committee.

Thank you for continuing to work to provide students with an opportunity to compete in UIL competitions.

Sincerely,

Charles Breithaupt, EdD