



August 16, 2021

To: Superintendent David Blanchard

In a few weeks, children all over New York will return to school. As pediatricians, infectious disease physicians, and public health experts from the Bernard and Millie Duker Children's Hospital at Albany Medical Center, our goal is to ensure that all children can safely return to school in person, full time, and participate in after school activities and sports. We advocate to minimize the risk for COVID-19 infection and exposure at school. A safe in-person school attendance is predicated on a universal masking policy for all children and staff. Our recommendations are based on the best medical advice and scientific research available.

#### **What We know:**

Delta is the predominant SARS-CoV-2 variant. Delta is more transmissible and possibly causes more serious disease compared to the original virus. Data indicate that the Delta variant is 40 to 60 percent more transmissible than Alpha and almost twice as transmissible as the original SARS-CoV-2 virus. As an example, Delta variant is more contagious than other viruses like Ebola, common cold, flu, and smallpox.

We have cared for young adults and children with COVID, and masking is an effective way to limit the spread of the virus until they can be vaccinated. Many children are not eligible for vaccination given their age. They are particularly susceptible to infection unless they are protected by masks. In addition, control and prevention protocols are important: hand washing, not attending school when sick, keeping physical distance, and staying in well ventilated areas whenever possible.

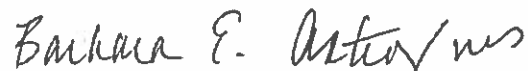
The rise of the Delta variant puts everyone at increased risk. Those who have been vaccinated are still protected against moderate and serious illness and death. However, protection is not 100 percent. Vaccinated people can still get infected and be contagious to others, particularly if they are unmasked and in poorly ventilated and crowded settings. Unvaccinated people are at risk for severe disease, hospitalization, and death. They also remain the main driver of COVID-19 in the communities around them. Vaccination with COVID vaccine is the best way to prevent serious COVID-19 and stop the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, children under the age of 12 years are not eligible for vaccination, making universal masking crucial to control the spread of SARS-CoV-2 infection.

#### **What we recommend to stay safe:**

Masking is a proven way to keep children safe from COVID-19, especially when children are indoors at school. There is abundant evidence that shows masking protects children and adults from COVID-19, including the Delta variant. It is recommended by the CDC, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Public Health Association, as well as most respected medical organizations.

We all are part of this community and we care deeply about the health of our neighbors, our patients, and all children. We recognize the importance of in person education and social interactions for children. Safe return to school must be coupled with universal masking to avoid school closures, and exclusion of exposed or infected children. The cost of COVID-19 infection and stress associated with testing of children cannot be underestimated, and it should be carefully considered as schools are finalizing their masking policies. Masked children are less likely to be exposed, and less likely to require testing. They are also less likely to be infected and require isolation and exclusion from school. Our unequivocal recommendation is for every school district to institute a universal mask wearing requirement for children and staff. Masking in schools will help keep our children and our community safe. Furthermore, we urge vaccination to all eligible adolescents and adults as soon as possible. Information regarding vaccination sites can be obtained at [capitalregionvax.org](http://capitalregionvax.org).

Sincerely yours,



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