



8.20.2021

Dear Superintendent:

As the new semester approaches, the child health care practitioners of the Bassett Healthcare Network would like to provide our recommendations to help ensure a safe return to school this fall. We have been impressed by the work you, your teachers, staff, and students have done for over a year now, to continue the educational process in whatever way possible. We share your appreciation of the importance of in-person learning and social interactions for our children. Our greatest hope is that all children will be able to attend school in person, full time and participate in after school activities and sports this academic year.

The CDC, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians, American Public Health Association and other respected medical organizations recommend a universal masking policy for all children and staff as the most effective way to minimize the risk of COVID-19 infection and exposure and to facilitate a safe return to in-person instruction. Wearing masks protects people from COVID-19 infection, and we support their universal use in schools.

The highly contagious Delta variant is the predominant SARS-CoV-2 variant circulating at this time. It is more than twice as contagious as previous variants and more contagious than Ebola, influenza, the common cold, and Smallpox. It also appears to cause more severe disease in those who contract it, regardless of age. There has been a surge in hospitalizations and deaths among the unvaccinated due to the Delta variant, with an increasing number of younger adults and children being hospitalized.

The Delta variant puts everyone at greater risk. While vaccination is our best hope for stemming the tide in this pandemic, children under 12 years old are not yet eligible for vaccination and are more susceptible to infection if not masked. People who have been vaccinated are protected against more serious illness from infection, however they can still get infected and be contagious to others. Unvaccinated people continue to be the most susceptible to the virus and the most likely to pass it to others. Therefore, universal masking is vitally important to infection control at every level.

As Bassett Healthcare Network practitioners, our mission is to improve the health of our patients and the well-being of our community. We believe that a successful return to in-person learning furthers both of these goals. Universal masking will help to ensure safety, avoid closures, minimize disease exposure and decrease absences. It will also help to reduce the stress to students associated with testing, isolation and exclusion from school. In the face of increasing risks associated with COVID infection in the pediatric population, we recommend it strongly and offer our full support for your district's decision to implement it as policy.

Sincerely,

Monica Brané, MD, FAAP
William Fredette, MD, FAAP
Chris Kjolhede, MD, MPH, FAAP
Kerri LeBlanc, MD, FAAP
Elizabeth Blasco, MD, FAAP
Joseph Sellers, MD
David Haswell, MD

Kenneth Riley, DO
Amy Grace, MD
Caroline DeCesare-Gomez, MD
Maureen Kuhn, NP
William McCue, NP
Christy O'Donnell, NP