



August 13, 2021

Re: Keeping Indiana's Children Safe and Healthy at School

Dear Indiana School Administrators, Communities, and Parents:

On behalf of Indiana's leading primary healthcare organizations, that collectively represent thousands of pediatricians and family physicians that serve families in every county of the state, we write today to discuss the issue of how to keep Indiana's children safe and healthy as they return to school this fall. Recognizing the critical role our schools play in the health and well-being of children, our organizations believe that schools should return to in-person education whenever it is safe and feasible to do so. The best way to make in-person education feasible for Indiana's kids is to require all students older than 2 years and all staff to wear face masks while in school.

Here in Indiana, we have already seen the benefits of the COVID-19 vaccine. Unfortunately, a large portion of our population remains unvaccinated, including all of our children younger than age 12. It is true that our youngest Hoosiers are also the most resilient to this virus; however, early data suggest that the delta virus is infecting many more children than previous strains, and children still suffer the consequences of COVID-19 infection in very real and meaningful ways.

We were hopeful earlier this summer when cases were low that masks would not be needed in school this fall. However, with the current rapid community spread of the delta virus, we are now in a different place.

Masks in school currently seem necessary for two reasons: first, it is the best way to keep kids in school and limit home quarantine time, and will help to protect the health of Hoosier children today and their success tomorrow. Second, limiting the role of in-person school in contributing to community spread of the virus will help to keep COVID from overwhelming our hospital systems again.

We know masks work – the use of masks during the last school year helped drastically reduce the presence of colds and the flu in our classrooms, in addition to decreasing the spread of COVID-19. This year, due to necessary protocols to protect against the pandemic, a common cold or simple sore throat might require a child to miss up to a week and a half of time in the classroom. Repeating that process even just a few times can have real and dramatic negative effects on a child's well-being. Indiana primary care physicians believe that universal masking in schools is a valuable tool at this critical juncture in the fight against COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) echoes the recommendations made in this letter. In updated guidance released on August 5, 2021, the CDC states that consistent expectations and enforcement



of universal masking for children over the age of 2 years outweighs the difficulty in monitoring and enforcing different mask policies for vaccinated versus unvaccinated children and staff.

At the same time, we also recognize that masks are not a perfect answer. Implementing a mask requirement will not guarantee that your school remains free of COVID-19. However, masks are a critical piece of a layered prevention strategy that also includes social distancing, screening, and testing that will give schools the best possible chance to stay open, keep kids healthy, and thrive throughout the school year.

We are also aware that one or two physicians have been speaking at school board meetings throughout Indiana advocating against the COVID-19 vaccine and masks. Much of what is being said by those individuals is false, misleading, and dangerous to the public. Those physicians do not speak on behalf of the thousands of primary care clinicians represented by this letter, and do a disservice to the entire state by mixing slight truths with patently false information. While our understanding of the effect that masks have on the transmission of COVID-19 continues to evolve over time, we know conclusively that masks are safe to wear and that masks will help keep kids in school by reducing the spread of numerous diseases.

No one enjoys the prospect of asking our kids to wear masks for yet another school year. It is our hope that the time comes soon when this viral surge is behind us and masks will not be a necessity for any Hoosier. Until that time, we must use the best information we have to make decisions that keep our kids safe and learning through in-person school.

Sincerely,

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American Academy of Pediatrics

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