

August 17, 2021

Dear Joplin-area Boards of Education and Superintendents,

We would like to start by thanking you for your consideration and thoughtfulness in keeping our children safe during these difficult times. We also applaud your performance last year, as the COVID-19 numbers were low amongst school students and staff; this was made possible by your policies and effort.

As we embark on the 2021-2022 academic year, we are writing to you to urge you to consider a position of universal masking for the upcoming school year.

We agree with the guidance from the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics that in-person learning is preferable to virtual options for schooling and feel it is imperative to achieve a full year of in-person education.¹⁻² However, COVID-19-related outbreaks will result in school closures and quarantines, disrupting in-person education.

We do not truly know the long-term effects from COVID-19, especially the Delta variant. With COVID-19 cases last year, we saw children with prolonged issues that can present weeks to months after initial infection, including heart, lung, kidney, blood vessel damage, and death.³ A recent article in *The Lancet* found that four in 100 children hospitalized with COVID-19 may develop long-term neurological complications at a much higher rate than adults.⁴

We currently know that the Delta variant is twice more contagious than the original COVID-19 strain and is now dominant in our community. Our local and regional hospitals have been inundated with COVID-19 patients, including children. Currently, our ICU beds in the Joplin area are at greater than 90% occupancy, mostly of unvaccinated COVID-19 patients. On August 16, 11 of the 52 new positive cases in Jasper County were in children under 19 years of age. This is a strikingly high percentage of a preventable disease. Currently in Jasper County, 29.8% of the population has initiated vaccination. In the state of Missouri, the current initiation rate of vaccination for children ages 12 to 17 is 35.5%.⁵ These numbers are far below the numbers needed for herd immunity in the population (vaccination rates around 70-80%), putting our children at risk. Furthermore, there are *no* pediatric ICU beds in Joplin for children younger than 18; children will need to be airlifted to Kansas City or Springfield for care.

There are two ways to protect from COVID-19 infection: Masks and vaccination. Currently, vaccination is only approved for children over 12 years of age. This leaves our youngest without a way to protect themselves even if they are willing to receive the vaccine. Masks work to reduce the spread of disease. Masks are a simple and cheap, lifesaving protective equipment. Cloth masks have been shown to decrease transmission of respiratory droplets, the main way COVID-19 is transmitted, by 50-70%.⁶⁻⁷ There is no strong evidence that masking harms adults or children either psychologically or physically. With such a simple, cheap, safe and effective way to protect our children, why would we not choose to have universal masking?

We have two examples from this past month. Neither school mandated masking. The Marion School District in Arkansas currently has more than 1,400 students in quarantine after 140 positive cases. Superintendent Fenter agreed “If our students had been under the same mask mandate that we administered last year, instead of 730 people quarantined. We would have had 42.” Similarly, in Florida, Brevard Public Schools have 470 COVID-19 cases and 1,060 students and faculty in quarantine after only one week of school unmasked.

In order to protect children, two large school districts in our region, Springfield Public Schools and Fayetteville Public Schools are both requiring masking for the school year. In addition, we applaud the Joplin Area Catholic Schools for beginning their school year with a mask mandate, and hope they will continue this as necessary.

To keep our kids in school and healthy, universal masking for Pre-K through grade 12 must be required for all students, teachers, staff and visitors on the school campus no matter vaccination status. This is consistent with both the most recent updated CDC guidance and guidance from the AAP.

We would recommend the following policy:

Universal masking for all indoor activities. Exemptions due to underlying medical conditions should be permitted with authorization from a licensed health care professional. Mask policies are enforced according to the code of conduct and honor code.. The policies should be reviewed as updated data are available.

Also, current CDC guidelines state that if someone is in direct contact (less than six feet for more than 15 minutes and are unvaccinated) they should quarantine at home and may be released with a negative COVID test on day seven. This is contrary to the guidelines established by the Joplin School District, which allow the exposed student to return to school wearing a mask if they exhibit no symptoms, or five days later with a negative test without wearing a mask. We strongly urge you to follow CDC guidelines in this regard.

We hope that the board will look towards the data, science, and advice of health care professionals and not succumb to the politicization and therefore, polarization that has occurred since COVID-19 began. We understand that personal choice matters, but the boards have other policies that go against it to save lives including a “nut-free” policy that occurs at many schools. How is this any different?

Without universal masking, school outbreaks are inevitable due to COVID-19. Both the staff and students will suffer if this occurs, and parents will have an added burden of teaching their kids in a virtual environment. After-school activities, including sports, will suffer as well. This all could be avoided with a universal masking policy. Why not protect our kids to the fullest?

We, the undersigned Joplin-area physicians, implore the Joplin-area school boards and superintendents to implement universal masking for the start of the upcoming school year.

We also offer to sit with your board on a periodic basis to re-evaluate the current data and need for masking protocols.

This letter has been addressed/sent to the following school boards: Joplin, Webb City, Carl Junction, Carthage, Joplin Area Catholic Schools System, College Heights, Neosho, Seneca, Thomas Jefferson Independent Day School, Galena, McDonald County, and East Newton. Please let us know how we can help.

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