

August 10, 2021

Dear Administrators and School Board Members of Northwest Lower Michigan,

We are writing as your northern Michigan community pediatric health experts. We have been on the front lines of the covid pandemic as physicians and caregivers to many of your students. We strongly support a universal masking policy for in-person schooling at all grade levels for the start of the 2021-2022 academic year, regardless of vaccination status.

Over the past 18 months we have learned a few things for certain. Vaccination is the best way to prevent COVID – 19. Universal masking is a close second. Third, with masking in place, in-school learning is safe and more effective than remote instruction, regardless of community rates of infection.

As you are likely aware, the delta variant of SARS- CoV-2 was recently identified in Grand Traverse County on July 21, 2021. Per the CDC, data shows this variant affects both children and adults. It has been shown to be much more contagious than the previous variants, and it causes more severe illness in unvaccinated individuals. With the original COVID-19 virus, one infected person could be expected to infect two other people, whereas the delta variant has shown one infected person infecting, on average, five others. Since delta was identified in GT county, our weekly average of new cases has doubled from 46 to 91 and similarly for hospitalizations. Within our own offices, we have witnessed this increase in test positivity on a local level over the past month. This is not a problem isolated to other regions of our country. In addition to being quickly and widely transmitted in indoor unmasked environments, delta variant has also been documented to be passed among vaccinated persons.

Experts agree, masks are proven to decrease transmission and infection. They are safe and effective, and our students wore them last year with few exceptions. Our students are a vulnerable population in that those under 12 have not had the opportunity to be vaccinated. In addition, we have a mental health crisis of depression and anxiety for which the routine of school and social interactions has been an important countermeasure. Furthermore, we should not ignore our immunocompromised or high-risk students, caregivers, and educators who have felt the isolation and vulnerability of this pandemic for the last 18 months. These at-risk children also deserve the opportunity to have as safe an in-person learning experience as possible.

It is reasonable to assume voluntary masking in schools will be less effective than universal masking. This could lead to unnecessary school closures and student quarantines. It might also become a significant source of community transmission. Grand Traverse County is already classified as having substantial community transmission, which according to current CDC, MDHHS and AAP recommendations, indicates that all individuals over age 2, regardless of immunization status, should be wearing masks at indoor gatherings.

Last year our group of pediatric practices advocated for a return to in-person schooling on the condition of implementation of appropriate safety measures in the best interest of our students. Removing one of the primary safeguards that led to that success, while battling a more dangerous variant in our community, in a majority unvaccinated student population, is counterproductive. This year our position is no different. Universal masking needs to be

implemented in all schools for the start of the 2021-2022 academic year.

Regards,

The Pediatricians of Grand Traverse Children's Clinic, Kids Creek Children's Clinic, and Traverse Area Pediatric and Adolescent Clinic

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