

**Open Letter to Our Community:**

Dedicated to our mission to improve health, inspire hope and save lives, our goals are to keep our community healthy, productive and to ensure we can care for all of their health needs. Through the lens of schools this means our focus is to:

- Keep children, educators and school staff healthy
- Help school attendees, educators and staff to be productive, able to work, learn and enjoy their lives
- Ensure our health system has the capacity and services to care for all community members

Our mission and these goals are behind everything we do to serve the community and its urgent health needs. We are facing a record number of COVID-19 patients in our hospitals and the highest positivity rate in our community since the pandemic began almost two years ago.

We know that masks help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and given the extraordinarily high transmission levels in our communities right now, we recommend people of all ages wear masks indoors when in public spaces, regardless of their vaccination status. This includes students and staff in K-12 schools. While children ages 5 and older can receive the vaccine, masking is an important extra step to contain any possible spread of this highly contagious virus.

When it comes to kids and schools, we can all agree that keeping kids safe while allowing them to thrive and learn in school is vitally important. To assure the greatest chance for in-person learning, universal masking is one of the best ways to prevent outbreaks and keep schools open and operational.

We also recommend vaccines and boosters for all who are eligible. COVID-19 continues to produce incredible suffering, disability and death within our communities. Vaccination and boosters make a difference. The evidence is undeniable. Vaccines help children and adults avoid serious illness, hospitalization and death from COVID-19.

Universal masking in schools while community transmission remains substantial to high (as per the local county health department metrics) will remain an incredibly important prevention strategy. Masking combined with vaccination and other mitigation strategies during these peak times of transmission will provide the highest likelihood of keeping schools open and operational, while allowing for our strained health care systems to provide life-saving care to our community at large.

Thank you for doing your part to help our community be healthy.

Respectfully,

Helen DeVos Children's Hospital Physicians:

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