

Dear School Board,

First and foremost, thank you for all your hard work and the compassion with which you approached the pandemic over the last academic year. We imagine it was challenging as there were so many unknown factors with the novel virus. We appreciate how you collaborated with healthcare experts to help make the last academic year successful.

We are writing to urge you to reconsider your position on allowing masking to be optional for the upcoming school year. It is imperative that we prioritize health, safety, and in-person learning for our children and that we do so by following the guidance of medical and public health experts.

The CDC's recent update titled "Science Brief: Transmission of Sars-Cov-2 in K-12 Schools and Early Care and Education Programs" states:

*Children and adolescents can also transmit SARS-CoV-2 infection to others. Early during the COVID-19 pandemic, children were not commonly identified as index cases in household or other clusters largely because schools and extracurricular activities around the world were closed or no longer held in-person. However, outbreaks among adolescents attending camps, sports events, and schools have demonstrated that adolescents can transmit SARS-CoV-2 to others. Furthermore, transmission studies that have examined secondary infection risk from children and adolescents to household contacts who are rapidly, frequently, and systematically tested demonstrate that transmission does occur.*

The American Academy of Pediatrics updated their guidelines on 7/19/21 and the Centers for Disease Control updated theirs on 8/5/21. The organizations work independently of each other and both have recommended that all students, staff, and visitors wear facemasks, regardless of vaccination status.

In their letter (8/5/21) to the FDA, AAP stated that the "Delta variant is surging at extremely alarming rates. The surge is seriously impacting all populations, including children...Last week saw the largest week-over-week percentage increase in pediatric COVID-19 cases since the start of the pandemic. The data show 71,726 COVID cases in children reported last week, almost double the 38,654 reported in the previous week...the Delta variant has created a new and pressing risk to children and adolescents across this country..."

The low death and hospitalization rate in children have often been referred to as "good news". We are concerned with this approach as the new Delta strain does infect children. Children are affected by COVID-19, COVID syndrome, and MIS-C (multisystem inflammatory system – in children). Some of our children will become seriously ill. They will require sedation, intubation (breathing tubes and machines), and airlifting to an ICU far from home. They will need blood product transfusions, their bodies will rage with fever, their hearts will swell and not be able to circulate blood, and they may require heart and lung machines to keep them alive. The children who recover will need ongoing monitoring to see how all their organs will fare in the long run. How many children will need to be affected before we deem it to be "bad news" and act?

Masking was "recommended" at a previous meeting. That is not enough. The unmasked population will place everyone in the building and on the bus at an unacceptable risk. Parents are entitled to their opinions about child-rearing. However, when these decisions impose

serious health risks to other students, it is imperative that we step back and consider the ramifications of these decisions. Furthermore, how will schools enforce masks for parents who opt to keep their children masked? What happens each time a 6y/o forgets to put their mask back on? What happens when an 11 y/o caves to peer pressure and takes it off or forgets to put one back on and rotates from class to class? When there is a universal rule, as there was last year, young students will keep the mask on, and staff can reasonably reinforce the rule. We have the opportunity to be proactive, rather than be reactive. Hand hygiene, masking, and social distancing decreased all viral infections last year. This can be confirmed by asking any pediatric care provider.

As of 8/9/21, Berks County has risen to “substantial” state of the pandemic again. Unfortunately, a significant portion of the student body is not eligible for the vaccine. Without vaccination or herd immunity to protect our children when school starts, now is the wrong time to take away preventative measures that allowed schools to stay open last year. School and public transportation are spaces all children are forced to share. Safety plans for those shared spaces cannot be based on personal preference. It is our moral obligation to protect every child, to the best of our ability. There is no data to show that masks lead to childhood illnesses. Masks do, however, help reduce transmission of COVID, thereby allowing our children to remain in school longer. This has been demonstrated most recently in Cheng et al in “Face masks effectively limit the probability of SARS-CoV2-transmission” (June 2021) and by Zimmerman et al in “Incidence and Secondary Transmission of SARS-COV-2 Infection in Schools ; The ABC Science Collaborative” (Pediatrics, April 2021). Without universal masking, significant school outbreaks due to COVID-19 will be inevitable. This will lead not only to disruptions in school attendance, but also to athletic participation.

Please consider:

- Masking for all indoor activities when in moderate, substantial, or high category
- Follow CDC guidance for COVID-19 prevention in K-12 schools (reference below)
- Contact tracing and quarantining, as recommended by CDC

Our purpose for writing to you is simple: we need your help in protecting our children. **Safe in-person learning is essential, and we need to take every measure possible to help prioritize that.**

We are your community healthcare providers. You trust us to help care for you, your children, your family, and your friends. Please partner with us on this medical issue as we continue to work tirelessly to do all we can to keep our children and communities safe. We implore you to follow the guidelines set forth by CDC and AAP and reconsider your position on universal masking.

We sincerely thank you again for your dedication to the children.

Sincerely,

The undersigned physicians of the Greater Berks Community

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Lisa Zimmerman, DO, Family Medicine  
David Zobian, MD, Pediatrics

**References:**

Science Brief: Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in K-12 Schools and Early Care and Education Programs - Updated | CDC

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/pdfs/mm7007e1-H.pdf>

Children and COVID-19: State-Level Data Report (aap.org)

<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html>

Zimmerman et al. Incidence and Secondary Transmission of SARS-COV-2 Infections in School (North Carolina's The ABC Science Collaborative) PEDIATRICS Vol 147, number 4, April 2021