



July 18, 2021

Dear Governor Pritzker, Dr. Ezike, Illinois State Superintendent Dr. Ayala, members of the Illinois State Board of Education, and school boards across Illinois:

The recent release of The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s [Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools](#) has led to much discussion among parents, teachers, and administrators about the upcoming school year. We applaud the CDC and IDPH's emphasis on getting children and adolescents back to in-person learning. However, we are concerned that the responsibility for interpreting and implementing this guidance now rests with local school districts, who may lack the resources to develop and enforce mitigation efforts for the children they serve.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has stated that [in-person learning is superior for the academic and social development](#) of children, **yet the benefits of in-person learning are only as good as our ability to keep schools open.**

Over the past school year, millions of children have returned to in-person learning protected from COVID-19 spread by the safe, successful wearing of masks. As the prevalence of the Delta variant and other [highly transmissible variants](#) rises throughout our communities, masks remain integral to the layered approach to COVID-19 prevention. Leaving mask guidance up to individual groups is ill-advised, as [cases rise in Illinois](#) and in light of recent outbreaks among children in [summer camps](#) where masks and vaccinations were not required.

In the absence of concrete guidance, we are already hearing of local school districts being pressured to prematurely abandon mitigation strategies, like universal masking, thus placing children, families, and communities at risk. Safe school policies must incorporate crucial metrics such as local vaccine rates and rises in case counts, hospitalizations, and contagious variants. We need uniform guidance from state public health entities that includes this information **before** schools consider relaxing protective measures for the start of school this fall.

As healthcare workers, parents, and Illinois residents, we appreciate the complex and ever-changing nature of these decisions. Layered mitigation strategies [have been shown to keep school transmission rates low](#) especially in classroom settings that include unvaccinated children. Children under 12 are still ineligible for vaccination, and [only a third of eligible adolescents in Illinois are fully vaccinated](#), which means the vast majority of Illinois children are left vulnerable to COVID-19 as they begin the school year.

We will be unable to avoid school outbreaks and closures unless we continue the layered approach we have relied on thus far to prevent transmission in schools. **Until a school meets a high threshold of vaccination for both students and staff, we strongly recommend that the State of Illinois continue to require universal masking in schools this fall.**

Sincerely,

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