

August 16, 2021

Dear Forest Hills Families,

As kids enjoy the final week of summer vacation, there is palpable excitement for the new school year. And, if your family is anything like mine, it is hard to say who is more excited - the kids or the parents! Thank you for your patience and support as we navigate the challenges created by this new Delta variant of COVID-19. We all share a common goal of having all kids attend school every day, learning and growing, and finding joy.

The public health conditions in Kent County are changing rapidly and, if we do nothing, a growing threat poses to disrupt the plans we all have for a great school year. Since the last time I wrote to you ten days ago, the COVID transmission risk level in Kent County has increased from “moderate” (level two of four) to “substantial” (level three of four) on the four-part risk level established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Additionally, COVID test positivity rates, new daily cases, and hospitalizations are all showing substantial increases. Consequently, we need to take additional steps to protect our elementary students who are not eligible for vaccination against COVID. We also need to rally around kids who have low immunity and desperately want the freedom to attend school after being away for 17 months. Here is how we can protect our kids and give them the freedom to attend school:

What

- Wear a mask inside a school. Masks are required for all students in grades PreK through 6 and any other unvaccinated people regardless of age or grade while inside school buildings.

Why

- To reduce risk of COVID transmission among vaccine-ineligible, young children
- To increase the likelihood of every child attending school every day
- To create a safe environment inside densely populated school buildings until such time the heightened risk subsides or elementary students are fully vaccinated
- To follow the science and research behind the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, state and local public health officials, and local pediatricians who are all urging schools to enact mask requirements inside school buildings
- Forest Hills Public Schools and districts across the state had hundreds of first-hand experiences throughout the 2020-21 school year with masks preventing transmission of COVID inside school environments
- To support students and families with lower immunity levels who desperately desire to come to school like their peers and friends
- To reduce the avenues of community spread to other populations that drive up the need for health care and emergency response resources
- To reduce the likelihood of required quarantines in the event of a defined outbreak (two or more positive cases that are epidemiologically linked)

How

- Explain to kids how wearing their mask indoors is helping to defeat COVID, keep their classmates safe, and support our doctors, nurses, hospital staffs and first responders
- Continue to push more learning experiences outdoors and provide more mask breaks so everyone can see each others' smiling faces
- Make masks available all throughout the school so kids can put on a fresh one whenever they need to
- Remind ourselves that children take their emotional cues from the trusted adults in their lives and to stay positive with this prevention measure even though we may be frustrated that we have to use it
- Continue to respect mask waivers written by physicians for people who cannot medically tolerate a face covering
- Remind ourselves that wearing a face covering is providing the freedom for others with health conditions to finally be able to attend school

As previously stated, anyone riding on a school bus, regardless of age or vaccination status **must** wear a face covering as required by existing public health orders.

I know that we are all tired of this pandemic. We are frustrated that it is impacting another school year. However, if we take these small steps now, continue to increase vaccination rates, and keep the Delta variant out of our classrooms, we can celebrate a great school year and keep students safe and healthy. Thank you for your willingness to make sacrifices so that all children can thrive.

Best wishes for a great start to the new school year!

With deep appreciation,

Dan Behm
Superintendent