



August 5, 2021

Dear District Administrators:

We are learning more and more that COVID-19 remains a real risk this school year, particularly for children under 12 who are not yet eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, and children who face barriers that make it difficult to get vaccinated. This is especially true for the rise of the more dangerous Delta variant of COVID-19. While more adults continue to be diagnosed with COVID-19 than children, children can still be infected with COVID-19 and spread it to others. They are also not immune to severe illness from COVID-19 and can develop post-COVID conditions such as [MIS-C](#) and [long COVID](#). Children under the age of 12 cannot yet get vaccinated, and that leaves almost half a million children in Wisconsin public schools vulnerable.

As a former Wisconsin school district leader who led a school district through COVID last year, I know many students and families desire in-person learning and a safe return to the classroom this fall. We want schools open for in-person instruction. We want to keep kids, staff, and families safe. That's what my school community wanted, and we worked hard to deliver that last school year. Throughout the school year, we required all children and staff to wear masks, and anyone visiting campus indoors to wear masks. Children wore masks on school buses to and from school and to and from activities. And while it wasn't *perfect*, it worked. It kept our schools open except for a few periods of high transmission in the community.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released new guidance for this school year considering the surge of infections from the Delta variant. They anticipate that by the end of August, if we don't take mitigation measures now, the death toll will again rise. I hope that by providing this guidance, along with my **strong recommendation for its use**, that if your community wants to keep its school open, you can do so safely and confidently. I realize that there are no guarantees. Even with all the precautions we took last year, we had infections and quarantines, but our numbers were manageable and greatly reduced because of our precautions, especially mask-wearing.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) recognize that the pandemic has taken a toll on the educational, mental, and emotional well-being of school-aged children, educators, and caregivers. In-person instruction is an important component for many children's physical, mental, and emotional health. Therefore, schools must continue to implement important COVID-19 prevention strategies that keep everyone safe, healthy, and in school.

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To help facilitate a return to safe, in-person learning, DPI has updated the [COVID-19 Infection Control and Mitigation Measures for Wisconsin Schools 2021/2022](#) and DHS has updated [Guidelines for the Prevention, Investigation, and Control of COVID-19 Outbreaks in K-12 Schools in Wisconsin](#) based on new [recommendations](#) from CDC. We are strongly recommending districts use these recommendations when implementing local responses to the continued pandemic.

In brief from the guidelines:

1. The strong recommendation that we mask all children and adults indoors: This includes school buildings and school activities, including athletics held indoors.
2. REQUIRING masking on school buses and school transportation: This, again, is required.
3. Outdoors masking is not required. (I strongly recommend building into your school schedule outdoor mask breaks, not just for 4K-5 during recess, but also for 6-12. This is also mentioned in the DPI Guidance).
4. Layered mitigation and prevention measures include:
 - a. Promoting COVID-19 vaccination among eligible students, teachers, and staff
 - b. Promoting consistent and correct mask use for everyone, regardless of vaccination status
 - c. Encouraging physical distancing and cohorting
 - d. Screening testing of students and staff who have symptoms
 - e. Staying home when sick and getting tested
 - f. Improving ventilation
 - g. Hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette
 - h. Enhanced cleaning and disinfection
 - i. Signage and communication

DHS recognizes these recommendations are not exhaustive, and that it may not be appropriate or feasible for every school to implement these strategies.

Again, personally, as a school district administrator both through the spring 2020 and the 2020-21 school year, we hired additional staff for both custodial and deep cleaning, and school health services via a medical assistant who acted as a liaison to county health and to parents. We gave older students masks breaks and built that into our daily schedule. We also provided masks to students on school buses and to any visitor that came to our building. While not perfect, it helped. And then, once the vaccine became available and students became eligible, we held student and community vaccine clinics on campus last spring through our county health department.

I would encourage you to carefully read [DPI's updated guidance](#) and discuss it with your communities. Much of it is already familiar to you as it closely mirrors last school year. My advice is that if we want to keep our schools open to in person learning, we follow it. I know that there is a lot of pressure to waive and/or not enforce mask requirements, and perhaps for some local

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activities held outdoors that makes sense. But please remind people how quickly this variant spreads and it is highly contagious. The long-term consequences outweigh the minor inconvenience of masking. Our kids are counting on us to keep them safe, and our communities are counting on us to keep our buildings open.

Finally - THANK YOU. I'm with you in solidarity, and I hope that this email from me and the DHS/DPI guidance included helps you and takes a little pressure off you. You have been under incredible amounts of stress. However, knowing that each decision to make is made with the best intentions and what is best for our students is reassuring to us all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jill Underly". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Dr. Jill Underly
State Superintendent

JU/mjc