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Dear Superintendents, Principals, and Heads of Schools:

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that for the 2021-2022 school year, all K-12 schools adopt universal masking for teachers, staff, students and visitors, regardless of COVID-19 vaccination status. CDC's guidance also addresses higher-risk sports and extra-curricular activities.

Collectively, we, as the Capital Region's local health department Commissioners and Directors, are writing to reinforce these public health recommendations and understand that students benefit from in-person learning on a multitude of levels. Safely returning students to in-person instruction is a priority and ask that you share the science behind AAP and CDC's recommendations with the families you serve. Below are important considerations:

- In New York State, the Delta variant of COVID-19 has been found to be the predominant strain of COVID-19 currently circulating. This is a significant change since the last school year. Data show that the Delta variant behaves differently than other strains of the virus: it is much more contagious and represents a threat particularly to unvaccinated individuals.
  - New data show that people infected with Delta have higher viral loads—meaning more virus in their body—than with previous variants.
  - Delta is causing some “vaccine breakthrough infections,” meaning infections in fully vaccinated people, than other strains have. But, even so:
    - Most breakthrough infections are mild.
    - Vaccines are working as they should—they are preventing severe illness, hospitalizations, and death.
- Vaccination is currently the leading public health prevention strategy to end the pandemic and is more urgent than ever as we respond to another surge of cases, particularly in areas with low vaccination rates. We continue to urge those that are eligible to get vaccinated.
  - If you get vaccinated, your risk of infection is ~3.5-fold lower, your risk of getting ill from COVID-19 is over 8-fold lower, and your risk of hospitalization or death is ~25-fold lower.
- At this time, since vaccination is only approved for those over 12 years of age, it is extremely important that children return to the in-person learning environment with layered prevention strategies in place.
  - Layered protection strategies include indoor masking, screening / testing, ventilation, handwashing and respiratory etiquette, staying home when sick and getting tested, contact tracing in combination with quarantine and isolation, and cleaning and disinfection of the school environment.

Screening / testing strategies for unvaccinated students, teachers and staff is recommended dependent on level of community transmission of COVID-19 as follows:

- Screening / testing at least once a week is recommended when community transmission is at moderate, substantial or high levels of community transmission. Schools may consider multiple testing strategies in consultation with local and state health authorities, for example testing a random sample of 10% of students who are not fully vaccinated, or conducting pooled testing of cohorts.
- To facilitate safe participation in sports, extracurricular activities and other activities with elevated risk (such as activities that involve singing, shouting, band and exercise that could lead to increased exhalation), schools are recommended to implement screening / testing for participants who are *not* fully vaccinated and could come into close contact with others during these activities.
- High-risk sports and extracurricular activities should be virtual or cancelled in areas of high community transmission *unless all participants are fully vaccinated*.

At present, New York State Department of Health has not issued updated guidance for the 2021-2022 school year. Guidelines presented above are not currently mandated by law but should serve to influence policy and procedure for return to school. We will share updates as they become available.

We appreciate ongoing communication and partnership in discussing strategies to resume in-person learning.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Whalen MD, MPH

Commissioner Albany County Department of Health

#### Additional Resources

CDC Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools

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

American Academy of Pediatrics COVID-19 Guidance for Safe Schools

<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/>



**Albany County Department of Health** is nationally accredited and meets rigorous public health standards set forth to best meet the needs of our community.