

**An Open Letter from West Virginia Health Organizations Urging West Virginia Schools to Incorporate Universal Masking to Ensure Safe, In-Person Learning for Students**

A return to in-person learning is vital for students in West Virginia as our schools and school-supported programs are essential for child and adolescent development and academic instruction and play important roles in building social and emotional skills, providing safety, reliable nutrition, physical/occupational/speech therapy, mental health services, health services, and so much more. However, as our state experiences a surge in COVID-19 cases and as the virus's highly contagious Delta variant spreads throughout the state, it is essential that in-person learning also be paired with the implementation of effective strategies to prevent the transmission of the virus in our schools.

**To ensure the health and safety of students and school staff in their return to in-person learning this fall, the state's leading health organizations, listed below, call on county boards of education and school administrators of public and private, primary and secondary schools in West Virginia to implement universal masking in their schools, in accordance with the [American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\)](#) and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) guidance for safe in-person learning.**

This guidance states that all students (age 2 and older), school staff and visitors should wear face masks at school, regardless of vaccination status (unless medical or developmental conditions prohibit use).

Universal masking is an essential and effective step to prevent person-to-person transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19 and is critical for the protection of those who cannot get the COVID-19 vaccines, such as children under 12 years of age. **Our students who are under 12 do not have the opportunity to be protected from COVID-19 through vaccination at this time, thus universal masking is the best way to protect them from the virus.** Further, universal mask-wearing at all schools, provides added protection for students and school personnel who are immunocompromised or have underlying health conditions that put them at high-risk for severe disease from COVID-19.

Research shows that if we follow good public health precautions, there is very low spread of COVID-19 in schools. Incorporating universal mask-wearing into a multi-pronged mitigation plan that includes vaccination of those who are eligible to receive the vaccine, ventilation, testing, quarantining, cleaning and disinfecting will make in-person learning as safe as possible for students and staff, subsequently reducing the disruptions caused by COVID-19 to academics, extracurricular activities and sports.

**Together, these strategies provide the best chance for our children to not only safely return to in-person learning, but also to be able to continue in-person learning and other school activities without interruption.**

Although COVID-19 vaccination is the most effective tool available for preventing disease and death from COVID-19, until this tool is available to all students and COVID-19 cases have diminished, **we urge schools to include universal mask-wearing for students and staff in their COVID-19 mitigation plans to ensure their protection from COVID-19 as they return to in-person learning.**

Sincerely (listed alphabetically),

American Academy of Pediatrics - WV Chapter  
American College of Physicians - WV Chapter  
CAMC Women and Children's Hospital  
Center for Rural Health Development, Inc.  
Hoops Family Children's Hospital at Cabell  
Huntington Hospital  
Think Kids

West Virginia Academy of Family Physicians  
West Virginia Association of School Nurses  
West Virginia Pharmacists Association  
West Virginia Osteopathic Medical Association  
West Virginia State Medical Association  
WVU Medicine Children's