



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

Montgomery County
Public Health District

Dear School Board Members and District Superintendents,

I would first like to congratulate you on a successful 2020-2021 school year. Unlike many school districts around the State and the country, our schools in Montgomery County were able to open and offer in-person learning for the majority of students. This is a testament to the hard work of the Boards, administration, staff, teachers, and students in each school. As we approach the upcoming school year, I wanted to discuss the current situation with COVID-19 infections in our county.

As you are aware, since July 1, 2021, we have seen a rapid rise in COVID-19 cases in Montgomery County. Whereas we had been seeing less than 10 new cases per day in late June and early July 2021, we are now seeing an average of 200 new cases per day and a peak (as of the time I am writing this letter) of 479 new cases on July 27, 2021. Likewise, hospitalization rates have also been rising. The hospitals in our county had also been down to single digits but, today, there are many hundreds of patients hospitalized with COVID-19, many on a ventilator in the ICU. This is an uncomfortable situation with schools opening in less than two weeks.

The vast majority of the new cases and essentially all of the hospitalizations have been seen in people who are unvaccinated. It may not be politically-correct to state this, but the unvaccinated residents of our county are driving the current wave of infection and will endanger the ability to keep schools open this year. The three COVID-19 vaccines available in the United States have been readily available to anyone over age 12 for several months. Those who have not received the vaccine have done so by choice as it is available at every CVS, Walgreen's, Kroger and other pharmacies - as well as walk-in clinics run by the local hospitals, urgent care clinics, the Lone Star Family Health Clinic and Montgomery County Public Health Clinic. The vaccine is covered by insurance or free to those without insurance. There is no excuse for someone who wants the vaccine not to have received it yet. I know that some people have been hesitant to receive the vaccine for a multitude of reasons. Those reasons are generally based on misinformation or disinformation disseminated by the traditional media, social media, friends and family. There are members of the school boards and even doctors in our community who have contributed to this vaccine hesitancy. As an expert in the area, I am telling you that the vaccine is safe, is very effective and, along with mask utilization, is the only preventive measure that we have to decrease the spread of the virus.

For the upcoming school year, we will not be able to adequately protect our students, teachers, and school staff due to Governor Abbott's edict disallowing school districts the autonomy to make rules to protect their students. The Governor's statements show lack of knowledge of the situation and are contrary to scientific recommendation. Although public school districts are not allowed to mandate mask utilization, it is your responsibility to strongly recommend and require mask utilization and vaccination in any way permissible by law. Children under 12 who cannot yet receive the vaccine should



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all wear masks in school. Students ages 12-18 are less than 40% vaccinated, so 60% are at risk and should wear masks. Teachers in our most vaccinated schools are only about 75% vaccinated, so 25% are at risk and should wear masks. It is not a small risk, but a mathematical certainty that every student and teacher will have exposures in school based on our current community numbers. If an unvaccinated student or teacher attends a class without a mask and a member of the class is diagnosed with COVID-19, the unvaccinated person will be required to quarantine for 14 days. Governor Abbott has not allowed an online option for school, so that student will miss 14 days of instruction. When they return, they will still be susceptible to quarantine if exposed again. It will not take long to run out of teachers or have an unacceptable absentee rate.

Our students have shown how well they could wear masks and perform last year, and, unfortunately, due to low vaccination rates in the county, will need to do so again. I suspect that this wave will last 6-8 weeks at which time we can reassess the situation. Until the current wave of new COVID-19 infections is over, mask utilization and a continued push to achieve higher level of vaccination are the only ways to keep schools successfully open. It is my duty as County Health Authority to make the best recommendations that I can based on current trends and scientific data. It is your responsibility as School Board members and Administrators to make fiduciary and safety recommendations to protect our students, teachers, staff and the entire in-person education system.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Charles R. Sims, MD

Montgomery County Health Authority