

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC
ARCHDIOCESE OF ATLANTA



OFFICE OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

July 23, 2021

Dear Catholic School Parents,

Greetings and peace. I hope you are all enjoying the summer and looking forward to a great school year.

I am contacting you today to inform you that recent COVID-19 developments have given us cause to carefully review of our protocols to ensure their optimal effectiveness in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and its variants to the students and staff in our Catholic schools. As a result of this review, the Office of Catholic Schools, in collaboration with our archdiocesan COVID-19 task force, is making a number of revisions to our multi-layered prevention strategies. While each Catholic school will be communicating these updated protocols to you in the immediate future, I thought it important to share with you how our archdiocesan schools will address an issue of particular concern at the present time; namely, those that relate to mask usage for students and school employees.

In balancing a positive “return-to-normal” approach to the coming school year with the reality of current health guidance and our relentless commitment to the safety of our students and staff, we are adopting the following hybrid masking protocols:

HYBRID MASKING PROTOCOLS

- Elementary schools will implement hybrid masking-related protocols based on maximizing the ability to move around the building more freely, return to a more interactive instructional model, and reduce the need to quarantine entire classrooms.
- Wearing masks will be required indoors when individuals are within 3 feet of proximity for more than 15 minutes. Please note: Our Catholic schools are being encouraged to develop classroom configurations, use of desk shields/barriers, hallway flow dynamics, cafeteria groupings, etc., in such a way as to reduce the need to require students to wear masks in keeping with our safety protocols.
- Students and staff should wear masks in indoor large group situations (school Masses, assemblies, shared office spaces) where physical distancing may be difficult or not maintained, and/or where students from various cohorts are combined.
- Masking is not required in settings where sustained contact for 15 minutes will not occur (class changes, cafeteria service lines, bathrooms, etc.).
- Masking is not required outdoors unless in a crowded outdoor setting or during activities that involve sustained close contact with other non-vaccinated individuals.

- As mandated by federal and state regulations, masks will be required on buses and other transportation vehicles at all times regardless of vaccination status. This directive applies to all students and school employees in both elementary and high schools.
- Parents may opt to have their child wear masks for all indoor activities. The schools will do their best to ensure that family decisions regarding whether to have their children wear masks at all times or only when required to do so are deeply respected.
- Masking is optional in high schools where students and staff have currently had the opportunity for vaccination.
- Parish preschool families will receive information and policies from the preschool director consistent with the directive from the pastor.

To be clear, at this time we do not see the need to mandate the wearing of masks at all times and in all settings in the Catholic schools of the Archdiocese of Atlanta. The reason for this position on the matter is due in large part to the proven effectiveness of our COVID-19 protocols we are carrying over from the prior school year and the confidence we are placing in our new ones which have been updated. The effectiveness of our protocols is demonstrated not only by our low positivity rates last school year but also in the low positivity rates of the many summer programs currently taking place in our schools. These programs have been operating with hybrid masking according to our protocols for over 2,500 K-12 grade students with only one positive case.

Current data regarding community and school transmission will provide guidance for adjusting protocols as the school year progresses and as vaccinations become available for all age groups served in our schools. As we have done since the beginning of the pandemic, we will continue to monitor all COVID-19-related data, remain open to federal and state health recommendations, and comply with all mandates.

Let me conclude by sharing that I am aware some members of our archdiocesan Catholic school community may find it easier to support our masking protocol updates than others. This is completely understandable. Few issues since the pandemic began have elicited such strong and conflicting views. Our hope is that everyone will continue to respect and support school leadership, and pray for an end to COVID-19. We are confident that, with the help of God's grace, the same collective commitment that kept our schools both open and educationally impactful last year will again animate our Catholic school community and create the conditions to make this coming school year a great success.

Sincerely,



Hal Plummer
Superintendent of Schools