

Dear Parents of Faithful Shepherd School,

At the end of July, after my first month of getting acquainted here with the school and the local community, I sent to all of you an initial statement, in the form of FAQ, presenting the basic layered and situational approach we will be taking in regard to the continued impact of Covid-19 and the delta variant of this virus. As noted then, our team has been continuously monitoring the local situation and studying guidance provided by expert sources such as CDC, Minnesota Dept of Health, and the Archdiocese of St. Paul/Minneapolis.

While there are many voices publicly quoted, and certainly differing opinions calling for careful discernment, today as we begin to assemble 450+ children from so many circles of interaction, I am asking you to accept – as I have – the clear and strong urging of the pediatric professionals to whom we have each entrusted our child's care since their birth. The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), whose member doctors, nurses, and medical specialists on children's health and well-being, are pleading that we **heed what the virus itself is requiring of us.**

In their [Covid-19 Guidance for Safe Schools](#), the AAP strongly advocates that **all policy considerations for school plans should start with the goal of keeping students safe and physically present in school.** The document further explains:

At this point in the pandemic, given what we know about low rates of in-school transmission when proper prevention measures are used, together with the availability of effective vaccines for those age 12 years and up, the benefits of in-person school outweigh the risks in almost all circumstances. Still, there needs to be a continued focus on keeping students safe, since not all students will have the opportunity or be eligible to be vaccinated before the start of school.

Following are **four of the key principles promoted by the American Academy of Pediatrics which Faithful Shepherd Catholic School will adopt to guide policy for the beginning of the school year.**

While we recognize that no community can eliminate all risks, it is our shared responsibility to employ all of the tools and means at our disposal to minimize risk for the sake of all of our families.

- **The AAP instructs that all eligible individuals should receive the COVID-19 vaccine.**
With the approach of full FDA approval for existing vaccines, and progress being made on a vaccine for younger children, Faithful Shepherd will continue to publish information to assist families in gaining access. Our local civic community has made strides to reach a near 70% vaccination level, and our school community could eventually exceed this.
- **The AAP instructs that all students older than 2 years and all school staff should wear face masks at school.**
As of August 30, 2021, all students, faculty, staff, parent volunteers and visitors are required to wear face coverings inside at Faithful Shepherd Catholic School (unless an exemption document from a health professional is on file in the school nurse's office).

The AAP website cited above further delineates the reasons for this need at this time. I can assure you that the teachers and I have **carefully evaluated the challenges of this requirement in light of less desirable alternatives** such as: strict physical distancing of students - which inhibits their interactive learning and their social bonding; frequent and prolonged quarantines; delaying the start of school; or even shutting down. While none of us wanted to start the school year in this shadow of Covid-19, **the use of universal masking is the least disruptive mitigation effort among these options**. We will evaluate this requirement again at the end of October.

- **The AAP instructs that schools must continue to take a multi-pronged, layered approach to protect students, teachers, and staff.**

While Faithful Shepherd Catholic School does not, of course, provide vaccinations or Covid testing, a combined **awareness of and utilization of these layers of protection in our home/school partnership will make in-person learning safe and possible**. Parents can add another layer by insuring that your student remains home if he/she is ill.

During the upcoming Teacher Workshop Week, teacher teams at each grade level, with the help of the overall school staff, will review all best practices for promoting good hygiene, monitoring proper use of face masks, ventilating in classrooms, cleaning and disinfecting in cafeteria and other large shared use spaces, supportively responding to absences, and maximizing outside opportunities, without masks, throughout each day. Faithful Shepherd School staff will oversee the implementation and effectiveness of these policies, making necessary revisions and adjustments as the year progresses.

- **The AAP instructs that school policies should be guided by supporting the overall health and well-being of all children, adolescents, their families, and their communities and should also look to create safe working environments for educators and school staff.**

Some parents have expressed to me the conviction that whether or not to wear a mask should be strictly a matter of **personal choice and personal responsibility**. Please be assured that I am a strong advocate of personal choice and personal responsibility, and will promote this in our school setting for all age groups whenever possible.

However, I must ask you to **prayerfully recognize that, in this matter of the communal life which a school provides, our choices impact the whole community**. For this reason, in the spirit of the gospel of Jesus and the rich tradition of Catholic social teaching to which we are bound, we strive to **“love our neighbors as we love ourselves”** and to accept sacrifices for the common good – for each other’s sake – as any healthy family does.

Across my years so far, I have come to recognize that there are some things we cannot control – and in those cases, what remains in our hands is the choice for how we will respond, what we will learn from the life circumstance thrust upon us. **Perhaps, for this year, the most profound choice in our hands will be: *What life lessons do we want our children to learn from us?***

*Peace, in the Shepherd’s care,
Catherine Butel, D. Min.
Principal, Faithful Shepherd Catholic School*