

November 3, 2021

Dear Faithful Shepherd Families,

In this month of Thanksgiving, we are [thankful for the blessings of the school year so far, and for the many ways that our home, school and parish partnerships are flourishing](#). Clearly, it is time for an update on our school Covid response. Many of you have shared your thoughts in writing and in person. Along with this, team meetings held in recent days have helped us to evaluate and to prepare our next steps as described below.

While we will express here our school planning in more detail, there are [two pressing questions](#) which have come up several times and for which we can provide an immediate response:

- 1) Does the school plan to require masks indefinitely?
- 2) Will the school require vaccines for children when these become available?

To both of these questions, we want to be clear that the answer is, “No”. Masks are not an end in themselves, and we have not employed them because we think they are an ultimate solution of any kind. In fact, as stated all along, they are only one layer of mitigation and only helpful if they contribute to our overall goal of keeping students in school.

Similarly, the arrival of an approved children’s vaccine significantly increases the percent of our school population who are now eligible for a vaccine – and, therefore, makes available an additional layer of mitigation which allows us to re-evaluate the whole picture again. We do not require vaccines of adults or children in the school – but for those who willingly choose this opportunity, it is now available to a larger percent of the school population. In the future, when any changes are made about safety protocols, there will not be distinctions based on vaccination status.

As expressed in earlier communications, we [continue to heed the guidance](#) of the CDC, the Minnesota Department of Health, and the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis, in order to [monitor the four factors](#) of: local transmission level of the virus; our actual in-school experience with Covid impact and with effective instruction; observations shared from neighboring schools; and progress toward the availability of vaccines for school aged children.

We are working actively and eagerly toward the day when masks will no longer be required – but that day has not yet arrived. Our intent is to “stay the course” with our current practices, including universal face coverings, through the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Assuming that the children’s vaccine is made available quickly in our area, this plan allows for the number

of weeks necessary for the two-step full vaccination for those who so choose, while also providing additional time for adults who may be seeking boosters. Another prominent reason for this conclusion is that it seems unwise to reduce mitigation layers in these three-week windows of instructional time, if the result could create new Covid exposure right when families are making travel and gathering plans.

Still, we have asked ourselves whether there is [anything we can add into the school experience during these months – things we may have missed last year but that we believe we can safely resume this year](#)? With this in mind, we are going to resume the following experiences while still utilizing masks and striving to give adequate attention to the amount of space and/or time for each interaction:

- All School Mass together weekly – rather than the livestream into classrooms – this will begin on Wednesday, November 9. Parents of the class leading the liturgical ministries for a given week continue to be invited to join us for Mass in the gym. Kindergarten students will be included (with 8th grade buddies) beginning in Advent.
- Buddy projects – between the grades already paired for lunch and recess – some shared lessons or holiday experiences will be planned, in some of our larger gathering spaces.
- Christmas performances with audience (number of guests TBD) – each grade level and the combined band/choir will present a musical performance in December. More details will be sent shortly, but the dates are posted in the Wednesday newsletter and on the website calendar.
- Resuming regular in-person schooling after the Christmas break, Monday, January 3rd- there will not be an automatic week of distanced learning.

For additional questions around quarantine and travel guidance, you might find it helpful to refer to these sites we have mentioned previously:

<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/contact.pdf>

<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/materials/varflyer.pdf>

As always, families who are managing a positive case with a family member, or a circumstance of close contact, are welcome to consult with our school nurses for additional guidance.

As soon as school resumes in the new calendar year, we will again take stock of all of the guidance from public health officials and the local factors particular to our school, and will communicate a 2022 Covid response update. It is our genuine hope that the whole community will soon be moving into more of an “endemic” phase, drawing on everything we have learned about how to embrace life with the reality of this virus within manageable bounds.

Again, thank you for your support and partnership in all aspects of school life. Faithful Shepherd Catholic School is a tremendously blessed and dedicated school community, with outstanding faculty and staff and with a generous heart for the good of each member.

Peace, in the Shepherd’s care,
Catherine Butel, Principal
Dan Keller, Assistant Principal
Covid Response Team Members