

September 29, 2021

Dear Faithful Shepherd Families,

As we conclude our third week of school together, we would like to share some observations and begin to discuss future steps and possible scenarios regarding Covid mitigation. First of all, **thank you for the many ways that you are supporting the efforts to keep everyone healthy at school**, such as holding your child home if he or she is not feeling well, utilizing Covid tests as needed, and staying in contact with our school nurses.

To date we have encountered only a few situations of student or staff potential exposure through family members, due to interactions outside of school. In each case the individual family has been very responsive to implementing the protective measures recommended by the MDH (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/schools/exguide.pdf>), and families of classmates have been notified in order to keep watch and to monitor for symptoms.

While we all look forward to the day when face masks will no longer be required, for these early weeks of school the **wearing of masks has allowed us greater flexibility** in terms of classroom learning activities and interactions. In addition, the **requirements around quarantine** are significantly reduced (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/contact.pdf>). Vaccinated individuals with possible exposure but with no symptoms do not need to quarantine, but are urged to monitor for symptoms and to get a Covid test 3-5 days after exposure. In a school setting, when a person with potential exposure, and those with whom they are in contact are all masked, it is not expected that whole classes would need to isolate or quarantine. We cannot guarantee that this would never occur, but our goal remains to minimize the likelihood through prevention. In the unlikely instance of close contact at school with unmasked individuals, our school nurse will review and discuss the recommendations directly with anyone involved.

For these reasons, we will continue with the mask requirement for now, and continue to evaluate and update you in another three weeks. The next very reasonable question is: **“Well, what type of observations would lead to a decision to reduce or remove the requirement of face masks?”** As a team we are monitoring four things in particular:

- The transmission level in the local community – which, for now, remains in a hazardous category – but which has also stopped rising at the rate we saw in August.
- The actual in-school experience – which, for now, due to everyone’s combined efforts, has been very limited in Covid impact and very positive in terms of our goals for in-person learning and for providing more access to parents.

- The experience of other schools in the communities where our families live, since they are monitoring and responding to the same local data from MDH, and also because we can always benefit from shared “best practices”.
- Progress toward the availability of vaccines for school-aged children – we know that even once these become available it will take some time for children to be fully vaccinated – but beginning this process in the school and in the community will provide another essential layer of protection and allow us to re-evaluate all other layers.

As these factors continue to **trend in positive directions**, we may be able to begin reducing the amount of time face masks are used – for example, in small class-specific groups where daily interaction has already been the norm, or in learning activities where social distancing can replace mask wearing for a specific period of time. We will certainly communicate with parents before any changes of this nature would be initiated.

Conversely, if any of the factors we are monitoring should **turn in a more critical direction**, we will be prepared to increase mitigation efforts such as more structured social distancing and group size limits, class quarantine in response to an outbreak at school, or – in the most extreme – a period of distance learning. Please be assured that we do not intend, nor foresee at this moment, the need for any of these measures. However, we want to assure you that we are preparing in the abundance of caution, and that we will notify you of any circumstances which seem to warrant increasing protective measures here at school.

Some families have inquired about **travel guidelines** – with a view to MEA break and even beginning some holiday planning. In order to help parents make wise decisions regarding travel, we urge you to become familiar with these guidelines for safe travel as they apply to your family: (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/materials/varflyer.pdf>). We encourage families to create a travel plan that follows the guidance and recommendations from MDH and CDC, and to communicate with your child's teacher regarding the health and wellness of all family members and students' anticipated return date.

Thank you for **outstanding participation in the September events** of Meet and Greet, Back-to-School Night, and Septemberfest! We know that the HSA is arranging additional parent volunteer opportunities and special events in the remaining months of 2021. See you there!

Peace, in the Shepherd's care,

Catherine Butel, Principal

Dan Keller, Assistant Principal

And Faithful Shepherd Covid Response Team Members