



## Public Information Release

### School Leaders, Parents Urged to Follow Guidance

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In Madison County, more than 78% of all people age 60 and older are vaccinated against COVID. High vaccination rates among this population have driven the virus to spread among the younger unvaccinated population – including those under age 12 who cannot be vaccinated yet. According to data from the Ohio Hospital Association, 19% of Madison County students age 12 to 14 are vaccinated against COVID. Just over 33% of Madison County students age 15 to 19 are vaccinated. Compared to similarly sized rural counties, Madison is doing well with the number of students vaccinated. However, compared to the surrounding counties in the central Ohio region, Madison is lagging behind.

As students and staff prepare for a new school year, Madison County Health Commissioner Chris Cook fully endorses the school recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) including universal masking. Cook recently met with all school leaders in the county and urged them to adopt the CDC guidelines. He also provided them with his K-12 Schools COVID Operational Playbook which highlights both vaccination for those who are eligible and masking especially for those who are unvaccinated. “The evidence supporting the effectiveness of vaccines and masks is overwhelming. That debate is over,” Cook says. “While other protective actions such as distancing, ventilation, and regular cleaning are important, they all pale in comparison to the impact vaccines and masks can have to prevent disease and keep students in school and sports this year.”

The COVID delta variant is currently the predominant strain in Ohio. Experts estimate that the delta variant is 50% more contagious than the alpha variant, which is itself 50% more contagious than the original COVID virus that started the pandemic. Until vaccine becomes available to all school-age students, Cook says the need to protect those who cannot get a vaccine yet has never been greater. “This year we have a vastly more contagious variant of the COVID virus and low vaccination rates among students. Masks are a non-negotiable prevention tool school leaders and parents need to use right now in our schools,” he says. When worn correctly and consistently masks work to keep droplets carrying the virus contained behind the mask; the same mask helps keep airborne droplets from being inhaled. Masks work best when everyone wears them.

Cook hopes that things will change in schools during the first part of 2022 as he expects vaccine to be available to younger students by the end of 2021. “COVID vaccines represent a stunning advancement in modern medicine. Soon all school-aged kids will have access to it,” he says. But until then, masks are critical to limit the spread of COVID and keep kids in school. Universal mask policies also allow students to continue to attend school after an exposure to a positive case of COVID in the classroom. However,

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this “break” in quarantine to attend school is only permissible when everyone is wearing a mask and desks are separated by at least three feet. “If there are no masks, there is no break in quarantine. Without masks every unvaccinated exposed student will be quarantined and will miss school for seven to ten days. And that’s each time there is an exposure,” Cook reports.

The Health Commissioner says schools and parents have a choice but contends it is not the choice you might think. “It’s not a choice about masks. It’s a choice to listen to the overwhelming chorus of public health experts at all levels, take prevention steps, and create the safest environment possible for students and staff. If we want kids in school as much as possible, school leaders will start the year requiring masks.” Cook says that if schools wait until case numbers increase before sounding the alarm to institute masks, it will be too late. “I’m not sure what number or metric will cause change at this point. We have a more contagious disease, a vulnerable young age group that can’t get vaccine yet, and few people wearing masks; that’s not a formula for keeping kids healthy and in school. Now is the time to put prevention strategies in place.”