



Population Health Consortium
of Northeast Florida

August 3, 2021

To the Honorable Superintendent and the Members of the Duval County Public School Board:

Dr. Diana L. Greene
Dr. Kelly Coker
Elizabeth Andersen
Cindy Pearson
Darryl Willie
Warren A. Jones
Charlotte Joyce
Lori Hershey

We write this letter to you as former Directors of the Florida Department of Health in Duval County. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown this novel virus has the ability to infect large numbers of people with increased aggressiveness. This is typical of new respiratory pathogens. As a virus deviates from its original form, it routinely becomes more virulent and affects younger populations, especially those who are unvaccinated.

As you are well aware, cases of COVID-19 are spiking in our community with percent positivity rates higher than at any other time during the pandemic. Our local hospitals are approaching capacity and are arranging for hospital beds in conference rooms. Unfortunately, more children are now being hospitalized, many in intensive care, than at any time in the pandemic.

Without vaccine availability for our elementary school aged children, low vaccine rates for 12-18 year-olds, increase infectivity and morbidity of the variant among younger people, the risk to students will be higher than it was in the fall of 2020. While most children will recover from COVID infections without significant disease, recent data suggest that over 50% will suffer with at least one symptom that will last for more than 4 months and nearly half of these children have symptoms that impair their quality of life. Data also indicate the possibility of lasting neurological effects.

The assumption that children do not drive community spread is based on data with the original variant. As shown in the UK, the delta variant is affecting a far younger age group, viral loads are significantly increased, and the positivity rate in those under the age of 25 substantially

higher than the older populations. It is reasonable to extrapolate that schools have a chance to be a more focal point of spread.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that, “Masks should be worn indoors by all individuals (age 2 and older) who are not fully vaccinated. Consistent and correct mask use by people who are not fully vaccinated is especially important indoors and in crowded settings, when physical distancing cannot be maintained.”

Broward County Public Schools, one of the nation’s largest districts, will require students, staff, and visitors to wear face coverings and practice social distancing when classes start in mid-August 2021. Other Florida counties are in the process of considering the same decision.

We understand there is now a state executive order, 21-175, that constrains the district’s ability to require masks for children in schools. However, in light of the high rates of community transmission, spiking hospital admissions for adults and children, low community vaccine rates, and inability to vaccinate younger children--we strongly encourage the Duval County School Board institute a mask mandate for students, teachers and staff during the 2021-22 school year.

We may not be able to safeguard all children in the country, the state or even Northeast Florida, but we certainly can do something to help protect the children in Duval County. We applaud the work of the school district to keep our students safe and healthy during the previous school year. Masks, hand-washing, and social distancing have been effective in stopping the transmission of COVID-19.

Thank you for your consideration of this recommendation. We are available to discuss this and other strategies to reduce the risk for COVID-19 among students, teachers, and staff.

Respectively,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeff Goldhagen".

Jeff Goldhagen, MD
Director, Department of Health-Duval
1993-2005

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Harmon".

Bob Harmon, MD
Director, Department of Health-Duval
2006-2012