



January 21, 2022

Dear Helena Public Schools Families and Staff,

Throughout Montana, including here in the Helena area, the Omicron variant is causing unprecedented growth in daily COVID cases. While we have more tools to prevent sickness than ever before, including vaccines and antiviral medications, the sheer volume of infection is disrupting our schools and community. We are dangerously close to moving to remote due to staff shortages. Absence rates for both students and staff are higher than they have ever been during the last two years. Despite these challenges keeping schools open five days a week has always been and continues to be our highest priority.

Until this fast-moving wave of cases and hospitalizations begins to decline, we will require that all students and staff wear a mask inside during school instructional hours, starting Monday, January 24. Masks are highly recommended for activities that take place outside of the regular instructional day. Helena Public Schools Nursing staff, Lewis & Clark Public Health, St. Peter's Health and CDC recommend masking and believe masking will help us keep schools open and prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed. Again, keeping our schools open is our primary objective.

When our staff or their own children are infected, they can't teach and support students. When students are infected, they miss out on learning opportunities. And when students, staff, or their families get sick, they rely on nurses, doctors, and hospitals who are already struggling to care for the surge of patients when they too are experiencing staffing shortages. The snowball just keeps rolling.

We must once again do everything we can to decrease the spread of COVID-19. The district is already Covid testing students and staff, though evening testing has been suspended due a shortage of testing supplies across the nation. Masks are available and increased filtering of the air in all our classrooms is also in place. But we expect the next two weeks to present perhaps the most challenging environment since the beginning of the pandemic in March of 2020. Keeping staff and students in school has become our biggest challenge.

While Omicron's ability to spread more easily than previous variants is causing a lot of isolations, quarantines, and sickness in a short period of time, it also appears that this wave will pass more quickly than those before as we've observed in other areas of the country.

The mask requirement, which takes effect this Monday, January 24, is a temporary measure to help us get through the worst of the Omicron. The requirement will be lifted as soon as it is safe to do so.

Please send your child to school with a high-quality mask. N95/KN95 respirators provide the most protection, followed by surgical masks, and then multi-layer cloth masks. Please do not use single-layer cloth masks, which are not considered adequate to prevent Omicron per CDC and Lewis and Clark Public Health recommendations. KN95 masks, N95 masks, three-layer cloth masks and surgical masks are available at every school, if needed. If your child has special health needs, please contact your school nurse.

Despite the challenges we'll face over the next few weeks, I'm heartened by the fact that we are learning to live with COVID. As we make the necessary adjustments – including masking, rescheduling non-essential staff meetings, and shifting meetings to remote format when possible – our district remains focused on our mission of academic excellence and continuous improvement.

I remain deeply grateful to our families, staff, and community for helping us keep COVID at bay so we can keep our schools focused on kids.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rex Weltz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Rex Weltz
Superintendent, Helena Public Schools