



DIOCESE OF BELLEVILLE

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**SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS**

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Dear Catholic School Families,

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has recently issued guidelines, adopting the July 7, 2021, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for return to school in the fall. The following is a summary of the critical information included in the new CDC guidelines:

- Students benefit from in-person learning, and safely returning to in-person instruction in the fall 2021 is a priority.
- Masks are recommended for individuals, age two 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.
- Schools maintain at least 3 feet of physical distance between students within classrooms, combined with indoor mask-wearing by people who are not fully vaccinated, to reduce transmission risk. When it is not possible to maintain a physical distance of at least 3 feet, such as when schools cannot fully re-open while maintaining these distances, it is especially important to layer multiple other prevention strategies, such as indoor masking.
- Students, teachers, and staff should stay home when they have signs of any infectious illness and be referred to their healthcare provider for testing and care.
- Localities should monitor community transmission, and occurrence of outbreaks to guide each school.
- Masking is required of all passengers and drivers on buses and other transportation used for a school-related activity.

Diocesan Guidelines for Catholic Schools and Parish Religious Education Programs:

Starting in the fall of the 2021 school year, all schools and religious education programs will return to in-person learning with a normal schedule. The Office of Education has adopted the above recommendations from the CDC. This means that fully vaccinated individuals are not required to wear a mask and that parents of unvaccinated students individually determine if their children will wear a mask while attending school or

religious education gatherings. The Office of Education strongly encourages parents and guardians to take into consideration the CDC and IDPH guidance and to consult their physicians before making decisions about the health and safety of their children.

Because layered mitigation approaches have proven to be most successful, things such as three (3) feet social distancing, hand washing, cleaning, disinfecting, and quarantining should continue when possible. The Office of Education will continue to work with local administrators and local health departments to continuously evaluate COVID protocols and will adjust mitigation efforts and recommendations for individual schools when necessary.

#### Vaccination:

Because of the current FDA status of the COVID-19 vaccination, it is distinct from other vaccines required for entry into schools. Receiving the vaccine is a family decision that should be made in consultation with the family's physician. Vaccination status may not be a requirement of eligibility to attend any school event or to be a member of any school organization. Public identification of vaccination status is prohibited, and no action should be taken against, or required of, an individual employee or child because of their vaccination status. Families may be asked to voluntarily inform the school of their child's COVID 19 vaccination status but are not required to provide this information. The only exception to this is in the case of an outbreak or exposure situation, in which case, quarantining and safety decisions need to be taken to protect those who are unvaccinated. In such a circumstance, every precaution should be made not to publicly identify the vaccination status of individuals.

#### Moving Forward:

There are many strong opinions on mask mitigation and the COVID-19 vaccination. Everyone has a personal reason for arriving at their own decision. Personal decisions about mitigations and the vaccine are exactly that – personal. It is imperative that we remember that our schools are institutions of the Catholic Church. This heightens our responsibility to embrace and defend the dignity of the human person. As we move forward in this next stage of school operations during a pandemic, we ask you to remember the dignity of the human person and to show respect for all, especially those who may arrive at a different decision.

I ask you to pray for all those who have been negatively impacted by this virus, for an end to the pandemic, and for a successful and safe school year.

Please contact your principal with specific questions about procedures at your school.

Yours in Christ,

*Jonathan Birdsong*

Superintendent of Schools

Director of Education