

Dear Fellow LMC Parents and Families,

The COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly shifted almost every aspect of our society and lives. As this is a new virus, our scientific communities have published (and in some cases retracted) a great deal of medical evidence and best practice recommendations which are evolving on a near constant basis. The dense amount of opinions and guidelines can be overwhelming. Our role within the LMC Return to School (RTS) Taskforce has been to provide medical guidance to ensure our updated school policies protect the health of our students, teachers, and staff.

Most notable in our RTS plan is a requirement for our students in transitional kindergarten and up to wear masks for the duration of the school day. Over the course of the school day, we recommend the children be offered opportunities for “mask breaks,” preferably outdoors. We will work with the administration to ensure these breaks are available multiple times throughout the day in addition to during snack times and lunch.

We feel strongly that this requirement is necessary to protect the absolute greatest number of individuals in our Lake Michigan Catholic extended community, not just the students, staff, and teachers physically in our buildings. Our recommendation is based on [CDC guidelines for school administration](#) subsection “*if there is minimal to moderate community transmission*” (as is the case here in Berrien county), the American Academy of Pediatrics [Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Entry](#), and [successful PPE strategies employed globally](#) in the past two months. Just yesterday, [JAMA Pediatrics](#) published data indicating that even our youngest students should be considered possible drivers for transmission of this virus.

Due to the ongoing evidence of escalating community transmission here in Southwest Michigan, it is our professional recommendation that universal masking of administration, staff, and students will reduce COVID outbreaks both within the school classrooms and in our Laker community. If a student tests positive and their classmates are all masked during exposure, we will be less likely to have to quarantine the entire class. The consistent use of masks will maximize the amount of on-campus learning opportunities for our students. We are confident these measures will also lessen the frequency of other common illnesses such as flu, colds, etc.

Though we are not explicitly recommending that all preschoolers must wear masks throughout their time at school, we know that many of our youngest Lakers will be able to- we encourage exploring that option with your child(ren). Preparing our children as much as possible for the changes coming this school year will yield the best results for us all. Children comfortable with masking are less likely to touch their face/mask throughout the day and thus reduce possible inadvertent self-contamination. The CDC recommends masks for children as young as 2 years old, and we anticipate that preschoolers will look forward to “copying” their siblings by masking at school.

One question we commonly get from our patients is about whether wearing a mask causes any medical issues. As physicians, we routinely wear masks for extended periods of time every day,

as do a number of our healthcare colleagues. If this were a safety hazard and truly harmful for oxygenation to the brain, heart, and other major organ systems, surgeons and anesthesiologists simply wouldn't have the mental or physical capabilities to perform extensive and intricate surgeries. While we agree that masks can be hot and itchy, there is no medical data to suggest that cotton masks cause low oxygen levels in the blood, too much carbon dioxide in the blood, or reduced immune response to other pathogens. The [American Lung Association](#), [American Academy of Asthma Allergy and Immunology](#), [American College of Chest Physicians](#), [American Thoracic Society](#), and the [COPD Foundation](#) have all released statements regarding the safety, efficacy, and necessity of facial coverings.

As a Catholic community entrenched in a global pandemic, we know that loving one's neighbor (and friends and teachers!) is the goal we all strive to achieve. Wearing a mask, even though it may be inconvenient and uncomfortable, shows you care about the health and safety of others. Parents, teachers, and staff are the best models to enable and encourage this necessary intervention to protect each other and help our local frontline medical teams minimize infections in our area.

We, as parents, feel the same levels of concern about the impending school year as you do. However, after a great deal of research and extensive discussion with local and national colleagues, we feel very comfortable to send our own children to Lake Michigan Catholic this year with the guidelines provided in the RTS plan. Onsite learning is essential for mental, social, and spiritual health, in addition to education, and we are confident our RTS plan will provide the greatest amount of in-person learning opportunities for each and every student in our community. We will continue to provide medical guidance to the RTS Taskforce as we navigate through the school year and welcome any questions you may have.

Thank you,

Dr. James Gendernalik

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**This statement encompasses our best medical advice based on research and is not an official statement by Spectrum Health Lakeland or Family Physicians of St. Joseph.*