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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP  
DIOCESE OF KNOXVILLE

When Catholic schools in our diocese opened on Aug. 4, I was delighted to see great joy on the faces of the children returning, in person, for another year of learning. Getting back to school seemed routine for some of the experienced students, while many of the youngest were seen holding hands with their parents as they slowly approached our doors-- to be greeted by smiling teachers and cheerful administrators. The encounters were personal, with teachers calling out to the students by name and quizzing them about how their summer went. Hugs were exchanged. The surroundings were welcoming and loving, and I am grateful to God for this wonderful diocese and the opportunity to educate children in a Catholic environment. God is good!

In late July, after consulting with our chancellor, our school superintendent, experts in the field of healthcare, and after doing much reading and praying, I made the decision that our diocese would open the school year by strongly encouraging the use of masks to mitigate health risks associated with COVID. While I advocate for wearing masks, I believe parents have the right and obligation to make that decision for their children, and I stand by this decision.

Our diocesan schools continue to abide by other health and safety protocols-- like safe distancing and deep cleaning, which we believe will further minimize the risks. The diocese has a long history of handling and safely guarding against the spread of infectious diseases in our schools. We will continue to follow our protocols and use the best information available while always providing a safe and enlightening in-person educational environment. Our schools report to us each day, and we will amend our policies if necessary.

We live in turbulent times and the displays of anger and lack of civility that I have witnessed in the media regarding the mask issue don't seem particularly helpful or Christian. For those who are eligible to do so, I ask that you consider being vaccinated. Also, I wholeheartedly urge the use of masks. May God bless us as we continue to pray, worship, and educate together.

In Christ,

Most Rev. Richard F. Stika  
Bishop of Knoxville