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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
DIOCESE OF KNOXVILLE

August 31, 2021

To: School Leaders and Parish School Pastors

The Diocese of Knoxville schools will temporarily (September 7, 2021 – October 1, 2021) require face coverings in an effort to minimize the number of our students being quarantined. Specifically, the Tennessee Department of Health's document Releasing Cases and Contacts From Isolation and Quarantine states that *"Quarantine Guidance and Exceptions for Close Contacts: In the K-12 setting, the close contact definition excludes individuals if both the infected individual and the exposed individual(s) correctly and consistently wore well-fitting masks the entire time."*

It is important to note when requiring a mask mandate that there is a very serious difference in the effectiveness of different masks when it comes to controlling bacterial and viral aerosols. Most commonly used masks that we see used (cloth masks and blue surgical masks), primarily due to problems with fit, filter about 10% of exhaled aerosol droplets (we acknowledge some older studies have indicated as high as 51%). The remaining aerosols (49%-90%) are redirected, mostly out the top of the mask where it fits over the nose and upper cheek bones, and escape into the ambient air unfiltered (exhaled aerosols that can accumulate indoors and spread the COVID-19 virus when inhaled by other people). By contrast, proper fitting N95 and KN95 masks, remove a minimum of 95% of all aerosols that are at least 0.3 microns in diameter. I know a lot of this may seem like common sense but there is a reason that medical practitioners wear N95 masks – they work much better.

As the Bishop of Knoxville, I continue to recognize the fundamental right of parents to direct the health care decisions for their children. I also understand that masks can cause daylong discomfort and stress, obstructed breathing and vision (thanks to fogged eyeglasses), and interference with communication, learning and social interaction. In that light, I am asking parents to fill out the following Opt-Out form if you DO NOT wish for your student to be required to wear a mask during this temporary mask mandate.

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Richard F. Stika
Bishop of Knoxville