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Adopting State's Guidance for K-12 Schools is Best Way to Create a Safer Return to School

Kimberly, WI – The Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards (WALHDAB) supports the goal of keeping students in the classroom for in-person learning for the 2021-2022 school year. As schools prepare for the upcoming school year, WALHDAB urges schools to follow recently published state guidance to better protect the health and safety of students and staff.

Adopting the following basic prevention strategies will provide schools the best opportunity to establish a safer environment necessary to sustain in-person learning throughout the school year. The Delta variant is one of the most contagious respiratory viruses and it spreads more easily and quickly than other variants.

“These recommendations come as our state experiences a surge in COVID-19 cases caused by the Delta variant, now the dominant strain of COVID-19 across the United States and in Wisconsin”, says Darren Rausch, WALHDAB Co-President and Greenfield Health Department Health Officer/Director.

Require Universal Masking

Masking is a proven tool in mitigating the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Masks are particularly important in a school setting given the significant portion of the student population that is either not vaccinated, or not yet eligible to receive the vaccine. Mask use, regardless of vaccination status is therefore the safest way for everyone in schools to protect themselves and prevent transmission to others. This recommendation is in alignment with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS). Masking all ages regardless of vaccination status is a key component and important to incorporate as school starts to keep kids healthy and safe in school.

Promote Vaccination

Vaccination continues to be our best path towards ending the COVID-19 pandemic and a critical strategy to help schools sustain a safe in-classroom learning environment. On May 12, Wisconsin expanded COVID-19 vaccine eligibility to include adolescents aged 12-15. Schools are asked to promote vaccines among

staff, families, and students by providing information, encouraging vaccine trust/confidence, and establishing supportive policies and practices that make vaccination easy and convenient.

Implement a Layered Approach to Mitigation

Again, the Delta variant has demonstrated increased transmissibility and all available layers of protection to lessen the spread of disease are important. WALHDAB strongly recommends using a layered approach. Adopting layered strategies, in addition to masking and vaccination, provide the best chances to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and create healthier and safer in-classroom learning environments for students, staff and teachers.

- CDC continues to recommend that people who are not fully vaccinated maintain **physical distance** of at least three feet from other people at school. Several [studies](#) from the 2020 – 2021 school year show low COVID-19 transmission levels among students in schools that had less than six feet of physical distance when the school implemented universal masking and other layered prevention strategies.
- Schools should work with their local health department to manage **contact tracing** efforts. Isolating those with positive COVID-19 test results, and quarantining close contacts helps all of us get ahead of the spread.
- CDC recommends offering symptomatic **testing** and screening testing depending on community transmission, population, and activity. See the [CDC website](#) for more information.
- Practice **good hygiene** by covering your cough, washing your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, and maintaining clean facilities. Cleaning once a day is enough to sufficiently remove potential virus that may be on surfaces. Visit the [CDC's website](#) for more information.

This effort requires a commitment from all of us that share a vision of healthier and safer return to in-classroom learning. These recommendations are by no means exhaustive or static. Intervention and control measures should be based on the most recent guidance available from local, state, and federal public health and healthcare authorities. School leaders are encouraged to regularly communicate, coordinate and update community plans with their local public health officials.

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