



August 25, 2021

Message from the Superintendent

We're ready to make this a great school year, and we thank you for understanding and working with us to keep the learning environment safe for everyone. Unfortunately, our Vicksburg community is divided right now, and that's a difficult place to start the new school year. Educating during a pandemic has been challenging, but as **#BulldogsUnited**, we continue to rise to the challenge. We all wish the COVID-19 pandemic were behind us. But, sadly, we aren't there yet.

In light of new health mandates stemming from the highly infectious Delta variant, health officials tell us that removing masks indoors could be harmful to our students. I am a firm believer that parents should have the right to make decisions for their children, and Vicksburg Community Schools respects parental rights. However, when making decisions that go against mandates and recommendations from health professionals, we must choose to follow the law. Our legal counsel has advised us that the mandate below issued by the Kalamazoo County Health and Community Services Department (KCHCSD) is a lawful and enforceable order.

The Kalamazoo County Health and Community Services Department, pursuant to the Michigan Public Health Code, issued the public health order requiring masks to be worn by students from Kindergarten through 6th grade. This order will be lifted six weeks after a COVID-19 vaccine is available in our community for children five years of age or older. Even one infected child could spread the virus to an entire class, especially in elementary schools where children aren't vaccinated.

Health professionals strongly recommend masks for unvaccinated children in schools at this point in the pandemic. Links to these recommendations are provided at the end of this letter. When students start school again, we will enforce the following safety protocols. We ask everyone to help us keep students and staff safe by following these protocols.

Mandate Enforcement:

We strongly recommend that all students and staff, Grades 7 through 12, wear masks inside VCS buildings regardless of vaccination status.

Masks are required for teachers, students and staff in Pre-K through 6th grades. If students show up to school without masks, we will provide them with masks to wear. The district will enforce strict compliance. If students refuse to wear a mask, they will be isolated from other students until they either wear a mask or are picked up by their parents/guardians.

Masks are not required outdoors. No student will be expected to wear a mask while on any VCS playground or while participating in outdoor activities. Our teachers will also be allowing plenty of time for mask breaks and increased outside time, when possible, to allow students time without masks.

Our contact tracing and quarantine protocols, per the Kalamazoo County Health and Community Services Department, are also linked below.

Exemptions:

Medical exemptions are allowed as outlined in the order:

- Students with developmental conditions of any age attending school, although supervised masking is encouraged.
- Teachers or staff working with deaf and hard of hearing children or students with developmental conditions who benefit from facial cues must be vaccinated or comply with masking directives.
- Persons who have a current medical reason confirmed in writing from a Medical Doctor (MD) or Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO) currently licensed to practice medicine in the State of Michigan.

There is no religious exemption to the Mask Mandate. Courts in our federal district and the Sixth Circuit have recently dismissed such religious challenges. See *Resurrection Sch. v. Gordon*, 507 F. Supp. 3d 897, 902 (W.D. Mich. 2020), *aff'd sub nom Resurrection Sch. v. Hertel*, ___ F.3d ___ (6th Cir., Aug. 23, 2021). The court found nothing in the near-universal mask requirement order of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Director that infringed on religious freedoms. See also *Commonwealth v. Beshear*, 981 F.3d 505, 507 (6th Cir. 2020) (holding that a religious school would likely not prevail on the merits of its claim that an executive order that prohibited in-person learning due to COVID-19 infringed on their religious freedoms since the order applied to every school equally).

We understand that this is a divisive and emotional issue and that everyone wants their side heard. While we cannot respond to every message, please know that we have taken your feedback into consideration and will continue to do so as we receive more guidance from the KCHCSD on Covid-related issues.

As your school superintendent, I am responsible for ensuring our schools are safe and effective learning environments. I am also responsible for making sure my team sets a good example for our students. Starting as early as pre-kindergarten, we begin to teach our students to follow the rules. As adults, we must also follow the rules. I am asking those who strongly oppose the mask mandate to set aside their objections and support us as we follow this rule. We hope these restrictions will pass quickly, but I encourage us all to work together while they are in place. My door is always open, and I welcome community input. Vicksburg Community Schools is committed to open and transparent operations and communication.

We are stronger together! Let's stand UNITED, and let's kick off a great school year for our kids. **#BulldogsUnited**

Sincerely,

Keevin O'Neill, VCS Superintendent

HEALTH AND SAFETY RECOMMENDATIONS

Contact tracing and quarantine protocols:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1eAuZXoXtlhNrr9NDmjATVPMRcb2Lz5sq/edit?usp=sharing&oid=103142478073923480604&rtpof=true&sd=true>

Kalamazoo County Health Department Order:

https://www.kalcounty.com/hcs/pdf_files/08.18.21_KCHCS_Mask_Order.pdf

CDC statement:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/index.html>

AAP statement:

<https://services.aap.org/en/news-room/news-releases/aap/2021/american-academy-of-pediatrics-updates-recommendations-for-opening-schools-in-fall-2021/>