

Memorandum

February 15, 2021

To: Flathead County School Superintendents

From: Joe Russell, Flathead County Health Officer

Re: Mask Use in Flathead County Schools

On February 12, 2021, Governor Gianforte rescinded the statewide mask use mandate. No countywide COVID-19 public health mitigation measures exist in Flathead County.

Our education system is a vital part of our community and the public health measures employed by our schools, so far, have allowed our schools to operate by means of in-person learning with very little disruption. The loss of the mask use in the school setting may have deleterious and unintended consequences. As witnessed during the past school year, remote learning may cause parents or guardians to leave the workforce to care for and assist with the education of their school-aged children. Without the protective measure of masks or face shields in place to control the transmission of SARS-CoV-2, educators may be very susceptible to COVID-19 illness or exposure leading to absence from school or faced with seeking the accommodation of leaving the school environment, leading to remote learning. If these were to occur, it will likely lead to the disruption of business continuity in Flathead County.

SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is primarily transmitted by respiratory droplets generated when people cough, sneeze, sing, talk, or breathe. Masks are primarily intended to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2 by reducing emission of virus-laden droplets. Masks are a method of source control but also offer some protection to the wearer by preventing the wearer from breathing in small or fine droplets and particles. Our school administrators will attest that the use of masks or face coverings, as well as increased physical distancing, hand washing, and the enhanced cleaning, sanitizing and disinfection of contact surfaces is effective to control the transmission of SARS-CoV-2.

It is with strong conviction that I state that existing mask use policies remain in effect in all schools in Flathead County. The Governor's directive states "schools should make reasonable efforts to follow school guidelines and best practices recommended by the CDC and the Montana Office of Public Instruction." Is it unreasonable to remove a mask mandate that has been in place and demonstrated to be effective for half of the school year?

The practice of public health is so much more than preventing illness. We know that children in a school setting are healthier than being captive at home and we certainly understand that a community at work is a healthy community, far better than what we experienced in the initial months of this pandemic. We are winning this battle. Let us not back off now.