

Dear Parents,

As we communicated on October 12, we, as the leaders of the parish and school, made a decision to require all students and staff to continue to wear masks, regardless of vaccination status, until November 12. At that time, we shared that our Task Force would re-evaluate conditions prior to November 12 and make a recommendation regarding a course of action beyond that date. Our Task Force met on November 8 and we would like to share with you the considerations discussed in that meeting.

Before we proceed, however, we want to again clarify that while final decision-making on all school matters, COVID-19-related and otherwise, rests with us, the Task Force is an advisory group that was called together in 2020 in early response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, there was an incredible amount of work to be done and much that was new to all of us, and the hope was that assembling this body of professionals would afford us resources to help us navigate those early, uncharted waters. The composition of this group has evolved, with some original members no longer participating, and new participants and guests having been invited to join the discussions. In addition to ourselves, the Task Force is comprised of school staff members as well as parents representing a wide variety of professional backgrounds and personal viewpoints. Robust discussion in Task Force meetings bears witness to the many different perspectives brought to the table for consideration and the fact that members do not always see eye-to-eye.

During the November 8 Task Force meeting, data was reviewed and discussion was held about next steps. Among the points of discussion were:

- Optional “Mask to Stay / Test to Play” guidance regarding quarantines for in-school exposures issued by the Ohio Department of Health on October 25, 2021 and subsequent clarifying information issued by Summit County Public Health;
- The fact that schools must either adopt the entire optional “Mask to Stay / Test to Play” approach listed above or not adopt it at all - with no option to select just one part of it;
- The fact that schools adopting the optional “Mask to Stay / Test to Play” approach are responsible for enforcing both the masking and testing requirements;
- The approval just last week of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine for children aged 5-11 and the need to allow time for completion of vaccination for those seeking it;
- The timing of the rollout of the optional “Mask to Stay / Test to Play” guidance just prior to the holiday season and just as vaccines for children aged 5-11 are being rolled out;
- The continued high numbers of pediatric COVID-19 and school-associated COVID-19 cases;
- Current St. Hilary School COVID-19 data for this school year, which includes a cumulative total of 7 COVID-19-positive students and zero COVID-19-positive staff (can be found [here](#) on our school website);

- The fact that none of the positive cases listed above originated within the school;
- The shortage of substitute teachers;
- The fact that many of our teachers and substitute teachers would be uncomfortable moving away from masks at this point in time;
- The amount of administrative time required to contact trace and communicate regarding COVID-19-positive exposures;
- The additional work required of teachers and staff members when students are quarantined at home, plus the time needed to gather make-up work for traditional absences;
- The uptick in COVID-19 activity in our school community just since last week (we currently have 11 students quarantining at home due to exposure to COVID-19-positive family members);
- The fact that St. Hilary School is among the more than half of the Catholic elementary schools in the Southern Area of the Diocese of Cleveland that are currently requiring masks;
- The fact that many area schools moved from mask optional to mask mandatory in recent weeks due to their positive cases and quarantines;
- The fact that high schools are in a completely different situation than elementary schools due to the opportunity their students have had for more than six months to be vaccinated and the ability of their students to independently manage online learning;
- The upcoming holiday season and indoor gatherings that will bring heightened risk of exposure;
- The fact that all students and staff will wear masks during the week following each holiday break regardless of what is decided going forward;
- The fact that we will remain in-person and not move to remote learning during the week following each holiday break;
- The need to protect the vulnerable in our community whether vaccinated or not;
- The upcoming respiratory virus season and predicted COVID-19 surge; and
- The ultimate goal of keeping our school open, our classrooms staffed with teachers, and our students present in their seats for in-person learning.

The Task Force was not the sole group consulted. As part of the discernment process in making our decision, we also sought feedback on these points from our Parents' Association Board and new School Advisory Council, both of whose members were elected by our school parents. To be exceedingly clear, however, the ultimate decision rests with us as the leaders of the parish and school.

Having prayerfully considered all of the listed factors, and taking under advisement the feedback received from the Task Force, Parents' Association Board and School Advisory Council, we have weighed a number of possibilities for how to best manage all of the nuances impacting this decision. We wanted to make the most sensible decision that accounts for all aspects of what lies ahead in the next few months.

Therefore, we have decided that all students and staff will continue to wear masks, regardless of vaccination status, through Friday, January 14, 2022. This will afford families choosing to have their children aged 5-11 vaccinated the opportunity to complete the two-shot COVID-19 series, and will also allow us to get through the holiday season and much of the respiratory virus season.

As always, the situation will continue to be monitored on an ongoing basis. When cases in Summit County and our school are at a level that would enable us to move to a mask optional protocol, we will do so. As we look ahead with this goal in mind, we will be considering the new “Mask to Stay / Test to Play” guidelines and all the facets that accompany them. We will also be consulting not only with our various parent groups, but with one of our most important stakeholder groups - our school staff - whose input is invaluable and without whom we do not have a school.

We want to underscore the weight of responsibility we take for each decision we have had to make during this pandemic. Being entrusted with the safety and well-being of over 500 students and close to 90 staff members is both humbling and daunting. As we consider the entirety of factors that lead us to make what we believe are the best decisions for everyone, we realize that, at the same time, no decision can ever be the best for everyone. We understand that, for a variety of reasons, some of you have wanted our school to be mask-optional from the first day of this school year. We also understand that some of you have children and other family members with serious medical conditions and compromised immunity. Many of your families have experienced COVID-19 illness and quarantine in your homes, and, sadly, some of your families have lost loved ones due to COVID-19.

Every decision we have made has been informed by the knowledge of these very real life situations, as well as all of the factors outlined above. We believe that the decision we are announcing today offers the best scenario for addressing all of the factors in favor of continuing to require masks, while also providing an expectation that we will soon begin to move forward in hope. While we realize that not everyone will agree with this decision, we appreciate your cooperation and understanding of all that we must balance as we painstakingly make each and every decision that impacts your children and our staff. In the event you wish to communicate with us about this topic, we simply ask that you do so with the same degree of respect that you would expect from us.

With gratitude for your ongoing support and prayers, and for the trust you have placed in us,

Sincerely,

Fr. Steve Brunovsky
Pastor

Mrs. Jennifer Woodman
Principal