

Dear Parents,

Welcome to the 2021-2022 school year! We are so excited to welcome all of our amazing students back into the building next week, and we are looking forward to another incredibly successful school year! We proved last year that students can safely learn in an in-person environment and we were a leader in being one of the first in the area to open both in person and with simultaneous learning provided by our very own teachers in our very own classrooms!

Last year at this time, Fr. Steve and I came to you to talk about all of the protocols that would help us to achieve our goals to keep our students in school and our entire school community safe. Last year was simple. No one was vaccinated. Everyone was mandated to wear masks. We all screened our symptoms, stayed apart, sanitized, followed the same quarantine guidelines, and made it through the year.

This year, things have changed. Most of our staff is vaccinated. Some of our students are vaccinated. However, most of our students are still not eligible to be vaccinated. And we have a new COVID-19 variant that is highly contagious and affecting many more children more than the original virus did. Just yesterday, we learned that the Community Transmission Level in Summit County increased to **HIGH**, and the CDC Area of Concern Category for Summit County changed to **HOTSPOT**. According to data from Summit County Public Health, pediatric cases in Summit County have nearly doubled in just the past two weeks. Medina zip code 44256, where many of our families reside, currently has the highest number of cases in our area. Currently, the CDC regards almost all of the counties in the state as areas of high-risk, threatening the health of the unvaccinated among us, including children under the age of 12. Therefore, the quarantine and isolation rules for exposure in schools must be followed.

Earlier this week, we heard from Governor DeWine, Ohio Department of Health Director Dr. Vanderhoff, Dr. John Bower, Pediatric Infectious Disease Specialist of Akron Children's Hospital, and Dr. Michael Forbes, Chairman of the Department of Pediatrics of Akron Children's Hospital. All four have warned us of the dire conditions that are now upon us. Dr. Forbes said we are in a "new pandemic". He said that things have changed, the virus has mutated, pediatric COVID cases and sadly, even deaths, are on the rise, and that children under 12 are now our highest risk group. Dr. Bower, Dr. Forbes and Dr. Vanderhoff have stated that cases of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children are very serious, and that symptoms can start as something as simple as sniffles and turn much worse very quickly. They have also stated that the first line of defense against this virus in general is vaccination, and for those who are not yet able to receive the vaccine, the most important layer of protection is to wear a mask.

Our leaders at the state and Diocesan levels have stopped short of issuing a masking mandate for schools, which has placed all school administrators in the incredibly difficult position of having to establish their own policies. Helping to guide us in making these decisions have been the members of our St. Hilary COVID-19 Task Force, which has met several times in the past few weeks. The members of this task force represent all constituencies of the school community, and we are blessed to have many health care professionals among this group. The majority of our task force members have also shared with us the gravity of the situation and the importance of wearing masks as a line of defense while the Delta variant continues to surge in our area.

We know the topic of masks in school is a very heated issue. Calls and emails have been flooding in from many of you voicing your concerns and expressing your options from all sides. But however divided the opinions on masks may be, let's go back to the one thing everyone can agree on: WE ALL WANT OUR KIDS TO BE IN SCHOOL!

One of the most important ways we have to keep our children in school right now is to minimize their risk of exposure at school and in so doing, minimize their need to quarantine or isolate. Please take a moment to review the attached chart published by the Ohio Department of Health. We shared this chart with you previously and ask you to review it again now. If you look carefully, you will notice that if a student is exposed to COVID-19 in the classroom setting, and if he or she has consistently been wearing a mask, the student will not need to quarantine. That means no missed school, no distance learning, and no disruption to your family life. It's that simple.

On the other hand, if a student has not consistently been wearing a mask, there are several "if-then" scenarios we must go through to contact trace and determine quarantine protocols. This means affected students will not be learning from home, which is the very thing we are all trying to avoid!

Of course, a student who has symptoms, tests positive, or is exposed OUTSIDE of the classroom setting will likely miss some school, but we can also keep that to a minimum by using masks to help curb transmission of the virus.

With all of this in mind, beginning August 23, all St. Hilary School students and staff will be required to wear masks in school. This requirement will be in place for four weeks, through September 17, at which time we will re-evaluate the situation. Masks will not be required during recess, while eating or drinking, and during physical education classes. Physical education classes will be held outside as much as possible, and even within our gym, we are able to maintain social distancing. Masks continue to be required on all school buses.

Besides keeping our students in school, wearing masks will help to keep our teachers in school. Our teachers no longer have the benefit of federal COVID leave days as they did last year, so if they must quarantine or isolate, they need to tap into their precious sick time to do so. Without our teachers, we do not have a school.

We are asking all of you to please support us in this effort to keep our school open, our students in their desks, and our teachers at the head of the class. Please talk with your children about this change, and why it is important, and maybe even have them practice wearing a mask if they have not worn one in a while. We also want to dispel any misconceptions about the timing of this communication and the fact that it is coincidentally coming to you on Friday evening before school begins on Monday. We have continued to receive information pertinent to this decision through today, and while this topic has been in our minds for weeks, the past week especially has been fairly consumed with normal school preparations that must be made aside from dealing with COVID-19. Quite honestly, it has only been this afternoon that we had the opportunity to pull all the pieces together to make this decision and communicate it to you.

Last year, you shared your gratitude and support and hailed us as heroes for providing an in-person learning option for your children. Please continue to trust us to make the tough decisions that must be made to provide that same opportunity for your children again this year. Please help us to remain SABER STRONG!

Sincerely,

Fr. Steve
Pastor

Mrs. Woodman
Principal