



August 27, 2021

An Open Letter to the People of Midland and Odessa:

As healthcare leaders serving Midland, Odessa and the surrounding region, we are frequently asked for advice on various issues related to management of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the return of our children to schools. To help achieve our common goal of safely educating our children, we offer the following letter with scientifically and medically backed advice for schools, parents, and the broader community.

Well into the second year of the pandemic, with no end in sight, the start of this school year has been a disconcerting challenge. Our children are back in school. Virtual options are less available than last year. The pandemic education experience to date has left many behind academically and has taken a social, emotional, and economic toll on children and families. This year, most families do not have the option of virtual learning. Parents have little choice but to return their children to school, and in doing so are asking themselves: Am I putting my child's health at risk?

Even in the midst of the pandemic — and as the Delta variant surges — we have tools to provide a relatively safe school environment with an acceptable level of risk. Maintaining safe schools will require a thoughtful, unified collaboration among schools, parents, and our community. Each one of us has a role to play in ensuring a safe and healthy return to school, even if you are not a parent, teacher, or student. Let us start with the good news. We know children tend to have milder disease. Over the course of the entire pandemic, there have been just over 400 documented deaths in the United States of children under eighteen. One death is too many, and statistics are of little comfort if it is your child, but out of 73 million children in the US, the absolute risk is still very low.

If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it should be humility related to what we do not know. We cannot be complacent. Most of our documented, epidemiologically validated data to date comes from before the emergence of the Delta variant. Delta is clearly more infectious. Pediatric cases are on the rise, and in some areas of the country they are beginning to strain hospital ICU capacity. Although the risk to the overall pediatric population remains statistically low, some children do become critically ill. The Delta variant is different than its predecessors and needs to be taken seriously.

While the virus has changed, so have the schools. Where much of last school year was blended with lower than normal classroom density, there are fewer virtual options this year, and classroom density will almost certainly be higher, making effective distancing more difficult. Parents and schools are in a difficult situation. We cannot wait until the pandemic is over to return to school. The virtual school experience was unsatisfactory for many students. We have an incomplete and ever-evolving set of facts that change as we learn more about the spread of this virus and as the virus evolves.

The following guidelines will help to keep children safe, and we strongly encourage all schools, school systems and parents to work together to implement them as rapidly as possible:

***Guidelines for schools and school systems***

- Strongly encourage vaccination of your faculty and staff. This is our single most powerful tool to protect ourselves, our community, and our children. Vaccines are safe, effective, free, and available.
- Encourage masking for all people in school buildings and on buses – faculty, staff, and students.
- Promote distancing. Maintain at least three feet of space between students, when possible, within the practical limits of school facilities.
- Limit or eliminate outside guests/visitors to school buildings.
- Do everything possible to discourage teachers and staff members from coming to work if they are sick (fever, cough, breathing difficulty, fatigue, body aches, sore throat, congestion, loss of taste or smell, diarrhea, headache), or if they test positive for COVID-19.

***Guidelines for parents***

- Work to make sure your circle of friends and family – the people your child will see regularly – are fully vaccinated. Again, vaccines are safe, effective, free, and available.
- Get your children vaccinated if they are 12 years old or older. Don’t wait. Remember, they will not enjoy full protection until two weeks after their second dose. Start today, and they are still 5-6 weeks away from maximal protection.
- Stress the importance of masking in public with your child, especially when indoors or in crowded environments.
- Do not send your child to school if they are sick (fever, cough, breathing difficulty, fatigue, body aches, sore throat, congestion, loss of taste or smell, diarrhea, headache), or if they test positive for COVID-19. • Carefully evaluate extracurricular activities and social gatherings. Make sure activities are designed to minimize the risk of exposure (vaccinate, mask, distance). If it does not feel safe, curtail after-school and social activities until the virus is clearly receding.

***Guidelines for the community***

- Schools do not function in isolation; they are part of the community. We all have a role to play in maximizing the education and safety of our students and in protecting the people responsible for their education. Do your part to reduce the amount of SARS-CoV-2 in the community.
- Work to make sure you and your circle of friends and family are fully vaccinated.
- Wear a mask when indoors in public spaces. This will help protect teachers, students and their families and friends while they are out in the community.

One final recommendation is for everyone. Recognize that this is a difficult time for all. Teaching is a noble but difficult profession in the best of times. COVID-19 has imposed an incredible burden on schools and teachers. The pandemic has forced parents to make decisions that are uncomfortable and unavoidable. We all need to work together to promote an environment of mutual respect. Please be kind to, and patient with, each other. We make these recommendations as health care leaders, guided by evidence, and bound by duty to protect the health of the public. Working together, return to school can still be a time of hopeful anticipation.

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