Our thoughts regarding a safe school environment

Students are back in the classroom in most Indiana districts, and educators are doing exceptional work trying to balance the benefits of in-person instructional experiences with the imperative for health and safety in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Finding that proper balance requires some compromise between what’s ideal in more normal times, and what is pragmatic in today’s situation.

Community Health Network values our longstanding partnership with area schools, which we view as a key part of our overall mission of enhancing health and well-being. We serve health and wellness needs in more than 150 area schools, and continue to work with educational leadership in finding the safest ways to return to school and learn face-to-face during the pandemic, and develop policies that protect all in the school environment. Here are some of our thoughts:

- Consistent with American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations, Community supports safe in-person learning. The importance of in-person learning is well-documented, and there is already evidence that school closures in 2020 had negative impacts on children.
- Community recognizes that every school district is unique, and must consider many variables as it makes decisions about the health, safety and educational success of students.
- Community agrees with and supports the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention regarding the use of protective masks in schools. We believe that all research, data and available information—combined with the current circulation of the highly contagious Delta variant—support this general recommendation:
  - All students older than age 2, along with all teachers, staff and visitors, should wear face masks at school (except in individual cases in which medical or developmental conditions prohibit the use of masks).
- Here are reasons Community and the AAP recommend universal masking in school at this time:
  - A significant portion of the student population is not eligible for vaccination, and must be protected from the transmission of COVID-19.
  - There is not an adequate system for monitoring vaccine status among students, teachers, staff and visitors. Absent an adequate way to enforce mask policies for those who are unvaccinated, the best strategy is universal masking for all. This helps create consistent messages, expectations, enforcement, and compliance, without the added burden of needing to monitor vaccination status.
  - Vaccination uptake within the surrounding school community is low in many areas.
  - There are continued concerns about variants that are more easily spread among children, adolescents and adults.
  - An added benefit of universal masking is the protection of students and staff from other respiratory illnesses that would take time away from school.
- Community also supports the recommendations from the AAP and CDC that adolescents ages 12 and up receive the COVID-19 vaccination. Currently, those ages 12 to 17 are allowed to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.