
HEALTH DEPARTMENT
MEDIA STATEMENT



STATEMENT FROM KENT COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATIVE HEALTH OFFICER:
ADAM LONDON

In the past several days, I have received hundreds, perhaps thousands, of emails and calls from concerned residents regarding the topic of masks in schools. These emails reflect the wide variety of perspectives people have on COVID-19, the value of facial coverings, the rights of parents, and the role of government. I want the people of Kent County to know that I appreciate your passionate and thoughtful correspondence. Please also know that while I have read and listened to the majority of these messages, I cannot possibly respond to each of them individually. I want to take this opportunity to broadly respond to your concerns and summarize the position of the Kent County Health Department.

It is true that the Michigan Public Health Code (Public Act 368 of 1978, as amended), a law that was created through the democratic process by elected officials, grants local health officers such as myself the authority to issue public health orders when it is determined that an imminent danger exists for the community that cannot otherwise be avoided. This ability is perhaps the most powerful authority granted to any unelected government official. I want you know that it is an authority that I humbly hold with the utmost respect and only exercise in the rarest of circumstances. To be an imminent danger a health threat needs to be severe for our population and all other reasonable solutions must be exhausted. It is also important that any order issued by a governing entity needs to be accompanied by a fair and effective enforcement process.

I deeply respect the freedom that our great nation promises, please also understand that when it comes to severe infectious diseases, the decisions of every person in public impacts the health, safety, and freedom of everyone else. Public health agencies and school systems have specific, albeit limited, powers and duties to impose restrictions under certain circumstances for the protection of health and safety. This is not a new idea; it is a principle that has its origin in the very founding of our nation and it's the reason these powers and duties have been codified in legislation for generations.

The present challenge facing communities across the country is indeed severe. The Delta variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus spreads many times quicker than the original form of the virus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has estimated that upwards of 83% of all new COVID cases in the US are caused by the Delta variant. A person infected with the Delta variant will, on average, spread that infection to between five and nine others compared to the original form which spreads to two or three other people on average. This current surge in new COVID cases began in the southern states and is rapidly advancing across the nation. Hospitals in those southern states are quickly reaching capacity. Over 90% percent of the intensive care unit beds in Florida and Texas are occupied due to this surge. Yesterday, the Dallas-Forth Worth Hospital Council announced that there are no available pediatric ICU beds in North Texas. Sadly, there has also been a steep incline in the number of pediatric COVID cases reported over the past six weeks from about 8,400 per week to almost 94,000 last week. Pediatricians are also increasingly concerned about multisystem inflammatory syndrome, which can be a serious, even deadly, inflammation of a child's internal organs, and

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also the chronic effects of long-COVID – and to be honest, no one knows the extent of the long term consequences of long-COVID which could damage people for the rest of their lives.

Michigan, thankfully, has been one of the last places to see the impact of the emerging threat from the Delta variant. Unfortunately and unavoidably, laboratory analyses of positive COVID tests here in Kent County have identified the Delta variant with increasing frequency over the past several weeks. We have seen our overall average of new COVID cases rise from 11 per day in early July to 86 per day this week. The rate at which COVID tests are found to be positive has increased from 2.0% to 7.3% during that same timeframe. Most importantly, only 16 people were treated as inpatients at our local hospitals for COVID-19 during the last week of July; 50 people have been treated as inpatients at those hospitals this week. This recent surge in cases, positivity, and hospitalizations closely matches the early days of the Delta variant related surge in other states. While models project that approximately 70% of our population has some level of immunity through vaccination and/or acquired immunity, a majority of the unprotected are the children of our community – especially those under the age of 12 years.

I appreciate how frustrating it can be to interpret all the information about COVID. The volume of confusing and often misleading and misinterpreted information on the internet and in the media is astounding. As the father of young children myself, I sincerely believe that every parent, regardless of their opinion on this matter, desperately wants to protect their children, see them get a great education, and see them happy. By the charge of my position, my team and I at the Kent County Health Department have a solemn obligation to support parents and schools in their roles as the people with the foremost opportunity to see the children thrive. And to be clear, at the Kent County Health Department, we're not nameless faceless bureaucrats making declarations from thousands of miles away. We are people who live and work here in West Michigan. We are your neighbors, your family, and your friends. Getting you the best information possible is important to us because it's personal for us.

While I have earned a doctorate in public health with a concentration in epidemiology and have over two decades of experience dealing with public health crises, I never rely solely on my own understanding when making important decisions. Further, while I have a team of epidemiologists, a physician, nurses, other scientists and professionals with many more decades of experience, I don't solely rely on their understanding either. Yes, I listen carefully to the community, but sound public health policy cannot be determined by who sends the most emails or rallies the most people to a protest. I always make sure that our information and solutions are supported by the research and conclusions of reputable organizations. I work with and trust the organizations and institutions which have a long and proven history of producing solid reliable information; organizations such as our local hospitals, research universities, professional associations of public health and health care experts, and the CDC. Additionally, and from the very beginning of this pandemic, the Kent County Health Department has also enlisted the review and guidance of external professionals from fields including pediatrics, internal medicine, industrial hygiene, ethics, and more. We are committed to making sure that the decisions and the recommendations coming from this department are always informed by the best information available. The internet is full of websites and documents that are poor quality, biased,

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misrepresented, unsupported by subsequent research, and in many cases intentionally designed to undermine the confidence that the American people have in their systems and in their neighbors. To be frank, my team and I do not have the time to sort through and dissect every website, document, conspiracy theory, and purported piece of evidence that is sent our way.

In conclusion, I am not issuing a public health order mandating masks in the schools at this time. This decision is due to the reality that not all options have been exhausted to prevent the danger before us. The schools and the parents have even greater power than the health department to protect the children and the community in this instance. They are also better positioned to enforce such action. Under Michigan's Revised School Code, public schools have a responsibility to provide for the safety and welfare of pupils while at school or a school sponsored activity. The authority of schools was affirmed by the Michigan Board of Education earlier this week when they approved a resolution that supports allowing local school districts to make "scientifically informed decisions" about whether to mandate COVID-19 masks for all students, teachers and visitors. To be clear, the Kent County Health Department has reviewed the science and we agree with conclusions of the CDC, the American Academy of Pediatrics, our local hospitals, our medical advisory workgroup, and the overwhelming body of peer-reviewed literature: the use of facial coverings in the school environment has been effective at significantly limiting COVID transmission.

At this time, I am presenting the community with the highest recommendation possible that schools and the parents require adherence to the guidance of the CDC, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, and the Kent County Health Department. Above all, I expect that the children under the age of 12, who are not yet eligible for vaccine, are protected through mask use and other proven prevention strategies.

Concentrating unmasked and unvaccinated persons into classrooms is very concerning based on observations of what is happening in other parts of the country where the new school year has already begun. While my greatest concern on this matter is for the welfare of the children, please understand that if COVID transmission is accelerating in any part of our community, that transmission will inevitably spill over into other parts of the community. That could also result in the capacity of our hospitals and healthcare providers to deliver timely outstanding care to be stretched to the limit once again. We must work together to protect their ability to care for COVID patients, but also to provide their full array of essential medical services. They cannot do that if they are faced with the same problems as their counterparts in other parts of the country. Like everyone else, I want to see schools open for in-person instruction and other activities without interruption. Our very best chance for that to happen is if schools, parents, and children embrace the strategies that have been proven to be effective.

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