

September 17, 2021

Thank you for all the letters, emails, calls, and comments surrounding a mask mandate for schools in Saginaw County. I value all constructive input and am taking it to heart in my decision-making process about mask mandates. Please know that I do NOT take any policy decision lightly.

As your public health leader, I am charged with assessing true risk and providing a “population-based” perspective. But I am also a mother, and I send my three children off to school each day wanting nothing more than their safety and continued good health.

For those who believe I am “avoiding” a school mask mandate to “please the other side” or to “avoid conflict,” please be assured that health officers on both sides of the issue are receiving intense personal and professional scrutiny, threats, public ridicule, and endless media attention. There is no avoiding conflict. This decision has nothing to do with politics. It has everything to do with making decisions based on evidence, data, and risk assessment for our communities.

I am grateful for the expertise of our medical community and their commitment to public health in Saginaw. I am confident we agree more than we disagree – protecting health for all residents of our county and doing so with utmost respect for one another.

Currently, 18% of counties in Michigan have school mask mandates. Seven of those 15 counties have new outbreaks this week. Schools both with and without mask mandates are experiencing positive cases. We can only ask schools to reduce the risk as much as possible, knowing the risk will never be zero.

To do so, the health department has provided districts with tools and guidance to control the spread of COVID-19, giving each the choice on how to best implement within their facilities and school communities. I have never had to mandate or “force” schools to control the spread of disease. And I don’t believe I have to during COVID-19.

Per our direction, schools are implementing numerous strategies to control COVID-19. It looks a bit different from district to district, as witnessed by actions taken this week. While Saginaw Public Schools, Francis Reh Academy and North Saginaw Charter Academy each chose to require masking at the beginning of the school year, Saginaw Township and Swan Valley joined them this week based on their cases and transmission. St. Charles High School decided to institute remote learning for two weeks to control the spread of COVID-19 after discovering a number of cases during antigen testing.

I commend leadership at these schools for working closely with us, taking decisive action based on real-time data to protect students, staff and the entire school community. They are doing exactly what we’ve asked them to do.

The Saginaw County Health Department will continue to monitor cases and transmission daily, working side-by-side with our public and parochial schools to protect students and staff.

Christina Harrington, MPH, health officer