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## BACK-TO-SCHOOL COVID COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT

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As schools prepare to re-open for the 2021/2022 school year, parents, schools and communities are turning to medical experts for guidance on how to ensure in-person return to school can be as safe as possible for all children. AAP chapters have a unique role to play in offering up local expertise and perspective to guide local governments and school districts toward a safe school experience.

This toolkit includes:

- Talking points for discussing AAP's recent return to school [guidance](#), which recommends universal masking for everyone age 2 and up and urges all eligible teachers and students to get vaccinated (press release [here](#))
- Instructions on how to develop a compelling op-ed supporting the guidance
- A press release template for chapter letters to governors and other elected officials

For any questions or assistance with drafting materials or pitching op-eds, please reach out to Dan DeBrakeleer at [ddebrakeleer@aap.org](mailto:ddebrakeleer@aap.org).

### TALKING POINTS

AAP strongly advocates that we should prioritize having students physically present in school. This should happen with careful measures to keep students and staff safe.

**All students and staff who are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine should get vaccinated.** We also urge families to make sure their children are up to date on **all vaccines**. The last thing we need as we work our way out of this pandemic is an outbreak of another vaccine-preventable disease.

**This pandemic has exacerbated an existing mental health crisis among children and teens.**

Schools should be prepared to offer resources and help.

- We saw negative impacts on children because of school closures in the spring of 2020. Lengthy time away from school often results in social isolation. We are concerned about children and teens who may be victims of physical or sexual abuse, or are struggling with substance use, depression, and suicidal ideation.

**To protect students, teachers and staff**, all children over the age of 2 years and all adult staff should wear face masks, regardless of whether they are vaccinated.

- **The AAP recommends universal masking in schools at this time for the following reasons:**
  - a significant portion of the student population is not eligible for vaccination;
  - protection of unvaccinated students from COVID-19 and to reduce transmission
  - lack of a system to monitor vaccine status among students, teachers and staff;
  - potential difficulty in monitoring or enforcing mask policies for those who are not vaccinated; in the absence of schools being able to do this monitoring, universal masking is the best and most effective strategy to create consistent messages, expectations, enforcement, and compliance without the added burden to needing to monitor vaccination status;
  - possibility of low vaccination uptake within the surrounding school community; and
  - continued concerns for variants such as the Delta variant that are more easily spread among children, adolescents and adults.

**Shortly after the AAP recommended universal masking for students, teachers, and staff**, the CDC updated its masking guidance for vaccinated people to reflect many of our recommendations for safe, in-person learning.

**Research shows that if we follow good public health precautions** – including getting vaccinated, wearing masks, physical distancing, and symptom reporting, there is very low spread of COVID in schools. More spread is happening outside schools, like when children or teens gather. We believe we need to prioritize getting children into school, because it's so important for their mental health, education and general well-being.

- Schools must continue to take a multi-pronged, layered approach to protect students, teachers, and staff (ie, universal mask use, distancing, testing, cleaning and disinfecting, ventilation). These layers of protection will make in-person learning safe and possible.
- Schools must be given the resources needed to provide layers of protection for students and staff. AAP emphasizes that funding must be available for communities and schools that have been under-resourced. This pandemic has worsened existing disparities and inequities experienced by students who are African American, Hispanic and Native-American, among others.
- State government officials should use science and data to guide decisions about the pandemic and school COVID-19 plans

- Mask wearing is critical to protecting children who are not yet vaccinated or eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine
- If your child is age 12 or older, the No. 1 way to protect them is to get them vaccinated. The vaccines are very effective, and they are powerful against the Delta variant too. We hope the vaccines will be available for younger ages this fall, so more children can have the benefit of that protection.
- Vaccines are a safe and effective method to reduce the burden of infectious disease. During the COVID-19 pandemic, children have missed routine well-child care and related vaccinations. If vaccination rates decline below levels required to maintain herd immunity, dangerous outbreaks of preventable diseases could follow.
- It is vital that we work together to enable schools to re-open for in-person learning this fall. It is so critical for our children's education as well as their social and emotional health. We can do that with the combination of vaccines, masks, and other strategies that we know can help make that environment safe for everyone.

## OP-ED GUIDANCE

Writing an op-ed to your local print or online newspaper can be one effective way to draw attention to the importance of ensuring children can return to in-person learning safely.

An op-ed is a personal perspective typically 500-600 words in length, though each publication has unique requirements. Your piece should be timely and relevant to your community and reflect your own personal perspective as a child health expert.

**If you are interested in writing an op-ed on this topic, please follow these steps:**

1. If you are new to op-ed writing or would like a refresher, **please watch [this short tutorial](#) on writing op-eds and letters to the editor from the AAP.**
2. Before drafting, think about these four keys to an effective op-ed: A timely news hook, a compelling personal perspective or patient story, state/local data or information and a call to action.
  - **Timely news hook:** What makes this op-ed relevant in your community/state right now? Have COVID figures worsened, especially among children?
  - **Personal narrative/patient story:** What unique perspective or story can you bring to help humanize this issue? Have you cared for patients who contracted COVID from a classroom setting? Have you met parents who desperately want their child to return to in-person learning but are concerned for their safety?

- **State/local data or information:** For data on COVID-19 community transmission, you can visit the [CDC tracker](#). You can also find data on vaccine hesitancy by county and zip code [here](#).
  - **A call to action:** Which of these do you plan to focus on as a commonsense policy proposal? Hone in on a simple argument and use that to develop an “ask”.
3. Get started on your draft! You can use and customize some of the key messages below to help draft your piece. These simple messages are only designed to help serve as a basic foundation and to help get you started.

**Submitting your op-ed:** Once you have initiated a draft op-ed, please contact Dan DeBrakeleer ([ddebrakeleer@aap.org](mailto:ddebrakeleer@aap.org)). We can provide suggestions or feedback, answer any questions, and help with pitching.

Please note that many op-eds are considered “exclusive;” you can only submit your piece to one newspaper at a time. Should one publication decline to publish your piece, you can resubmit to another, but you should avoid sending your op-ed to several newspapers at once. There is no guarantee that your op-ed will be published.

You can view some examples of well-written op-eds below:

**Bucks County Courier Times:** [Central Bucks School District: Ignoring American Academy of Pediatrics hurts kids](#), by Dr. Miriam Mahmud

**Tennessean:** [As children return to school, here are ways to keep them safe from COVID-19](#), by 11 Middle Tennessee Pediatricians

**Tennessean:** [Staying up-to-date on immunizations will keep Tennessee kids healthy and safe](#), by Dr. Dorothy Sinard and Dr. Barbara Dentz

#### **Key op-ed messages/prompts:**

- Children have already sacrificed so much throughout this pandemic. Children under age 12 are not yet eligible for the vaccine and have so much to benefit from in-person learning. Virtual learning also comes with systemic barriers that disproportionately affect children of color, while the social isolation takes a massive toll on the mental health of all children. We must prioritize children’s health and safety as we return to school this fall.
- As a pediatrician in (city/state) – *share your unique perspective, a deidentified patient story, illustrate how COVID in schools has affected your community.*
- Mask wearing is critical to protecting children who are not yet vaccinated or eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine. Children are resilient and adaptable and have adjusted to

masking throughout the pandemic. (Click [here](#) for guidance on addressing masking for children)

- How have students with disabilities and/or chronic illness been disproportionately impacted by the loss of in-person learning and the risks of returning to the classroom without proper safety measures in place?
- State and local officials must be serious about protecting the health of children returning to school this fall. If there are specific bills/Executive Orders that you oppose/support feel free to mention them here as a call to action
- Are there local organizations you could partner with to make your message more powerful?

## PRESS RELEASE TEMPLATE

**Please see below** for a customizable press release template for chapter letters to governors or other elected officials. Distributing a press release alongside these letters can help attract media attention and allow chapters to have more control over the narrative.

For assistance with drafting, editing, and sending a release, please reach out to Dan DeBrakeleer ([ddebrakeleer@aap.org](mailto:ddebrakeleer@aap.org)).

### **FOR RELEASE:**

*August XX, 2021*

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# The [STATE] Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics Urges Gov. [NAME] to Incorporate New Safety Measures into School Guidance for Fall 2021

*The [STATE] AAP's letter calls for universal masking in schools for students above age 2, staff, and teachers.*

**CITY, STATE** – Today, the [STATE] Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics sent a letter to Gov. [NAME] urging [him/her] to adjust school guidance to reflect the AAP's [most recent guidance](#) on safe, in-person learning.

*[LETTER EXCERPT]*

The letter comes as [STATE] experiences a surge in COVID-19 cases, as the virus's highly contagious Delta variant makes its way across the country. Increases in infections, hospitalizations, and deaths have concerned medical and educational professionals, who wish to bring children back into classrooms while minimizing the risk of a COVID-19 outbreak.

*[CHAPTER QUOTE]*

To ensure children are able to return to school safely, the American Academy of Pediatrics recently [updated its guidance](#) around in-person learning, which includes – alongside vaccinations – a recommendation that everyone older than age 2 wear masks, regardless of vaccination status.

Other recommendations included in the AAP guidance are:

- Schools should be prepared to adopt an all-encompassing approach for mental health support.
- Adequate and timely COVID-19 testing resources must be available and accessible.

- Strategies should be revised and adapted depending on the level of viral transmission and test positivity rate throughout the community and schools.
- School policies should be adjusted to align with new information about the pandemic; administrators should refine approaches when specific policies are not working.
- School districts must be in close communication and coordinate with state and/or local public health authorities, school nurses, local pediatric practitioners, and other medical experts.

AAP also urges families to call their pediatrician and have children caught up on all vaccines they may have missed during the pandemic. This includes getting a vaccine to protect against influenza, which, like COVID-19, can cause severe illness and death.

Click [here](#) to view the AAP's full guidance for opening schools in Fall 2021. The full text of the [STATE] AAP's letter to Gov. [NAME] is below.

*[INSERT FULL LETTER]*

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