



Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama

Post Office Box 12047 (35202-2047)

2121 Third Avenue North

Birmingham, Alabama 35203

205-838-8322

Office of the Bishop

August 2, 2021

Dear Catholic School Community,

Several parents have written to me and our Schools Office expressing their concerns regarding the temporary mask requirement to begin the academic year.

Having spoken with Margaret Dubose, our Superintendent of Schools, I understand that the requirement was not made lightly. The decision was reached through a broad discernment process that sought real time input from health authorities, infectious disease physicians, and observing the school districts already open in neighboring states. It seems that these schools began without masks and in short order had high incidences of the variant race through the student and staff population. While thankfully no deaths were reported, the disruption in the communities could have been spared with the mask requirement. These districts had to re-impose a compulsory use of masks by all students for in-school classes and, in some instances I understand, revert back to on-line teaching.

The requirement for students to wear masks for a month seems very reasonable particularly since it will be re-evaluated and updated around Labor Day with more real time data. I view it as a prudent and mature measure to deal with this vexing variant as it is reaching alarming rates in our state.

As a consequence of our health stance in the Diocese, I am informed that some of our Catholic schools have seen increases in enrollment because of the stronger safety measures we have in place.

The principle that has guided me is this: I would rather we do something more and wonder why we did it, than do something less and regret that we didn't do more. In your families, I know you take whatever cautionary measures are appropriate to your family situation. As a family of families, our schools have that obligation as well. It naturally raises a healthy tension between individual freedoms and the interests of the common good.

As I think about it, many of our schools serve more than children. Faculty, staff, and volunteers are of varying ages and health conditions. We don't wish to neglect our obligations to provide the safest possible environment for all so that the school mission can operate with a full complement of staff and services.

As you know, I received the vaccination this past January / February. I feel the relief of knowing I have done my part to protect those with whom I am in contact. I urge those eligible and able, to be vaccinated for the sake of caring for yourselves and the broader community. To do so is an act of charity toward others. This includes faculty, staff, and eligible students.

We have a great opportunity to get this pesky and infectious variant under control as hospitalizations spike throughout the State of Alabama. Knowing that most will not die from contracting the variant, there is still the risk of exacerbated health complications that may affect one the rest of life. This is becoming clearer as the data emerges daily. I want the best for all, and I know you do as well.

As a diocese, we are proud that our schools remained open all last year. Kudos to all who made it work! Our safety procedures in place at that time contributed highly to the successful year. It gives our students a great advantage. This year, after a thorough evaluation, we are opening with fewer restrictions but with a note of caution. It is not unreasonable that the school authorities have to offer their best judgment in providing safe health environments in our school communities. We depend on the good will of everyone to ensure the safest possible atmosphere for all those connected with the school mission.

Thank you for listening to me and may God bless you, your families, and our Catholic Schools!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "+ Steven J. Raica". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Steven J Raica
Bishop of Birmingham in Alabama