THE CITY OF Fargo FAR MORE

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Prevent. Promote. Protect.

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While national expert groups such as the Centers for Disease Control and the American Academy of Pediatrics continue to advocate for K-12 school universal masking, it has become increasingly clear the implementation of these recommendations should be carefully considered from a local perspective, and in close communication with local public health agencies.

Recently, Fargo Cass Public Health (FCPH), in consultation with the North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) and FCPH's Physician Advisory Group, met to review and update recommendations for school systems. The primary goal remains preservation of in-person learning.

Full vaccination from COVID-19 continues to be the best defense against community spread, serious illness and death. It is the opinion of experts that COVID-19 is transitioning from pandemic to endemic, meaning the virus will not be eradicated and risk of exposure will remain. As such, we continue to assess the evolving landscape locally.

The primary factor considered for updating K-12 policy recommendations is vaccine availability for the 5-11 year old demographic. With recent approval for that age demographic, all individuals in the K-12 system now have access to safe and effective vaccines.

Other current and emerging factors considered as part of the local landscape include the following:

- Plateau of cases with continued high community transmission rates
- Booster doses available for many adults to combat waning immunity
- Monoclonal antibodies readily available for those 12 and older
- Oral antiviral medications expected to be available soon and show great promise in shifting COVID-19 to a largely outpatient, treatable illness, ultimately working to reduce hospitalizations
- COVID-19 testing widely available

Other local considerations that have been challenging to the pandemic response efforts include low population level immunity, minimal adherence to recommended community mitigation strategies, resisting or delaying COVID-19 testing, and decreased compliance with isolation/quarantine guidance.

FCPH continues to recommend a multi-layered approach for school mitigation of COVID-19, as previously communicated. **In consideration of the above, beginning January 15, 2022, the guidance for universal masking in Cass County school systems will transition to masks strongly recommended.** This date allows time for 5-11 year olds to be fully vaccinated, and an adequate time frame to monitor and identify exposures and new cases following the holiday break, where many are traveling and gathering with others.

There are circumstances in the future that may prompt a change in the above recommendation requiring an increase in mitigation strategies, such as but not limited to:

- A new COVID variant of concern that is widely circulating and not responding to vaccine.
- A substantial community case increase, with concern of hospital capacity.
- A substantial school outbreak causing interruption in instruction due to staffing issues or child absenteeism.

As schools adjust masking requirements, a potential increased number of exposures is possible and the NDDoH may be unable to notify all students. NDDoH will continue to notify schools of all positive cases associated within their district and recommend quarantine for any unmasked and unvaccinated exposure. Many school districts are offering COVID-19 testing on-site, which allows for serial testing and asymptomatic close contacts to remain in school. If an individual is experiencing symptoms, NDDoH will continue to recommend following isolation/quarantine guidelines.

FCPH values our collaboration with local partners. Thank you for your support in making decisions that are in the best interest of our children and our community during this challenging time.

Respectfully,

Fargo Cass Public Health