



TO: Parents/Guardians

CC: Most Rev. Daniel R. Jenky & Most Rev. Louis Tylka
Bishops of Peoria

FROM: Dr. Sharon Weiss
Superintendent of Schools

DATE: August 9, 2021

RE: Opening of New School Year & COVID-19 Masking Mandate

On Wednesday, August 4, 2021, Governor J.B. Pritzker issued an Executive Order in which he mandated the wearing of masks for the opening of the 2021-2022 school year. Administrators, teachers, staff, students, and volunteers in all public and nonpublic schools in the State of Illinois, whether vaccinated or non-vaccinated, will be required to wear masks.

The Office of Catholic Schools (OCS), has received concerns regarding the diocesan directive that our 42 elementary and secondary schools will comply with the Governor's Executive Order. The purpose of this memo is to clarify and explain OCS' decision to require the wearing of masks to begin the new school year.

During a world-wide pandemic, the governor has the authority to declare a public health emergency and to order schools – public and nonpublic – to comply with the Illinois Department of Public Health's advisement to wear masks and implement other measures in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and its variants. As reported, positivity rates for COVID19 and the Delta variant are climbing throughout the state which is cause for great concern.

Any school – public or nonpublic - which chooses to be defiant may have several adverse things occur. The Governor can take measures which will directly affect the continuing operations of the school, up to and including closing a school that refuses to comply.

Catholic Mutual Group, our diocesan insurer, recommends that all members follow the CDC/state/county/local mandates or guidelines. Disregarding them could be considered gross negligence associated with the COVID-19 response and could subject the schools to unnecessary liability.

As Superintendent, I will not put our schools at risk by not complying. Our bishops have directed OCS to ensure that our Catholic schools *do* comply with the Governor's mandate, thus ensuring a safe environment for in-person learning to occur. I ask for your understanding and assistance.

Subsequently, if our parents/guardians send their younger children to school without a mask or if our older students refuse to wear a mask, *these students will be immediately sent home*. If this situation persists, our principals have been directed to contact families with the message that their student's enrollment will be terminated if the policies and regulations of our Catholic school are not followed.

The Catholic Church's mission in her schools is to educate children in an environment where the Gospel of Jesus Christ is shared. It is a tremendous privilege that we have been given by Christ in our vocations as educators, and I certainly do not want to interrupt the Church's mission in *any* way. It is not our intention to terminate ANY student's enrollment, but we will be forced to if there is not compliance.

I respectfully ask for your cooperation in helping us provide the best opening of a new school year that we can possibly provide *while still in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic*.

Thank you.