

Dear School District,

We know that returning to school in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic is concerning to you, and you are receiving a lot of feedback from parents, educators and others.

As your partner in health care who is concerned about the well-being of all people we serve, we'd like to help by offering our perspective that has been developed through the latest research, physician advice and recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Avera advocates the wearing of masks by everyone in a public setting. Current research is showing that masks may reduce community transmission of the virus and prevent illness in healthy people. We also know that a fair percentage of people who have the virus do not show symptoms – yet they can pass the virus on to others.

Therefore we recommend that all staff and students wear face masks in school.

We understand that some staff or students would be unable to wear masks due to a developmental or physical condition, for example, a sensory disorder or pulmonary condition.

Schools can determine their own policies, but as an example, these exceptions could be determined by school health and special education professionals, and outlined in the student's individualized education plan (IEP).

Masks are more effective if everyone wears them. They are also more effective when used with other measures such as hand hygiene and social distancing.

The type of mask can vary – from a disposable or cloth face mask that loops over the ears to a neck covering that can be pulled up over the nose and mouth. Teachers might find that face shields are more effective for oral communication.

Equipment and high-traffic areas should be cleaned and disinfected often. We also recommend that hand sanitizer be readily available, that frequent handwashing be encouraged, and that staff be screened for symptoms, as well as students as is feasible.

Schools and other group settings are prime locations for virus transmission. We see this annually with colds and influenza. Masking and other measures will help protect everyone and possibly prevent the possibility of having to close schools again.

For each person in our society, wearing a mask might make the difference that prevents someone else from becoming seriously ill or dying from this virus. We can all do our part to prevent these tragedies. For all these reasons and based on the latest research, we highly recommend policies that include masking of everyone who is out in public – including students, teachers and other school staff.

For information that can be shared with parents about wearing and laundering masks, as well as other ways to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, please download our COVID-19 New Normal Patient Toolkit at [avera.org/toolkit](https://www.avera.org/toolkit).

Sincerely,

Avera Gettysburg Hospital & Avera Oahe Manor