

August 12, 2021

Georgina C. Pérez  
SBOE Member District 1  
1605 George Dieter, #582  
El Paso, TX 79936  
(915) 261-8663  
[georgina.perez@tea.texas.gov](mailto:georgina.perez@tea.texas.gov)

Dear Ms. Pérez:

In my roles as Chair of Pediatrics at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center and Chief Transformation Officer of El Paso Children's Hospital I have witnessed firsthand the devastating impact of COVID-19 on children, their families, and our community. Of high concern, we have seen a significant uptick of cases among school-age children as they return to class over the past two weeks. As Vice President of the Board of Doctors of the World, USA, an organization that views indifference to preventable illness itself a disease, I implore you to give very serious consideration to policy requiring masking in schools. As a pediatrician, I support guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC)<sup>1</sup> and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)<sup>2</sup> that in-person learning options are preferable to virtual for both the academic and social-developmental merits. COVID-19 outbreaks, which could be averted by universal masking along with other mitigation practices, could force school closures and disrupt in-person children's education.

The Delta variant is a game changer with unknown long-term effects on our children. It is more than twice as contagious as the original COVID-19 strain and it is now the dominant strain in our community. Despite all of our recent progress in fighting this pandemic, the rapidly rising cases in the El Paso area now show a disappointing regression back to where we were nearly 8 months ago, with daily new cases in the - 200 range.<sup>3</sup> El Paso Children's Hospital is currently devoting 20 to 40% of its inpatient pediatric acute care beds due to COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses. Adult hospitalizations are also increasing at an alarming rate and more and more ICU beds are being used by COVID-19 patients.<sup>3</sup> Current vaccination rates among children aged 12 to 15 in El Paso are less than 30%. This, combined with the lack of an approved COVID-19 vaccine for children less than 12 means that rates of protection in our classrooms are well below the 70-80% needed to achieve herd immunity.<sup>4</sup>

**To keep our children in school while keeping them healthy, I support the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation of universal masking Pre-K through 12 be required for all students, teachers, staff, and visitors, even for those who are vaccinated. This is consistent with the updated CDC guidance which was released on July 27th.**<sup>5</sup> The recommendations include the following:

- Universal masking for everyone as noted above while indoors and when safe distances cannot be maintained.
- The schools should partner with local public health experts to determine when to safely discontinue universal masking.
- Mask exemptions due to underlying medical conditions should be permitted with authorization by a licensed medical practitioner (MD, DO, APRN, PA).
- Mask policies will be enforced according to the school's code of conduct and the necessary disciplinary action shall occur for individuals who do not comply.

- These policies should be reviewed on a routine basis and modified according to the most current data available due the fluid and ever-changing nature of this deadly disease.

I urge the El Paso area Superintendents, Deputy Superintendents, the Boards of Education, County Commissioners and all community leaders to mandate a universal mask policy for the safety and health of our children and our community as a whole.

Sincerely,



Glenn J. Fennelly, MD, MPH  
Vice President of the Board  
Doctors of the World, USA

[glennfennelly@doctorsoftheworld.org](mailto:glennfennelly@doctorsoftheworld.org)

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html>
2. <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>
3. <https://www.epstrong.org/results.php>
4. <https://data.statesman.com/covid-19-vaccine-tracker/texas/el-paso-county/48141/>
5. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated-guidance.html>