December 28, 2021

Dear School Superintendents, Administrators and School Board members:

Each of you has done a remarkable job in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, working hard each day to keep your students safe and in school. We recognize the importance of in-person learning for the cognitive, social, and emotional development of our children, and share your belief that the best place for kids is in school, full-time, in the classroom learning with their peers.

As we have learned during the past two years, things shift quickly with COVID-19. Today, we are faced with a new variant, Omicron, which is more contagious than previous variants. This variant is spreading rapidly through Ohio and is expected to become the dominant variant within the coming weeks. In other parts of the country, where Omicron already has spread rapidly, pediatric hospitalizations have spiked. In New York City and the surrounding areas, pediatric hospitalizations jumped by 395% during December.

With adult hospitalizations already nearing an all-time high, and the positivity rate for those being tested for COVID-19 nearing 25%, we are reminding all Ohioans of the severity of our current situation.

The best protection against developing severe illness from COVID-19, for both school-aged children and adults, remains getting vaccinated. While younger, school-aged Ohioans continue to get vaccinated, it is critical that we keep following protocols to protect students, teachers, staff, and their families at home.

To those of you who are continuing to require masks in school – thank you. This simple step is one of the best ways that we can slow the spread of the virus. To those who do not currently have a mask requirement, we respectfully ask that you consider one as your students return after holiday break. Health experts around Ohio have recommended Ohio schools have masking policies until more students get vaccinated, and that remains their recommendation as students return to school next week. This is even more urgent now because of the rapid spread of the Omicron variant.

We know that the virus that causes COVID-19 is spread when you cough, sneeze, talk, or sing. We know that masks work and are effective at slowing the spread of this virus. The best way to keep kids in school is to slow the spread of the virus. The best ways to slow the spread of the virus are to get vaccinated and wear a mask.

Even students who are asymptomatic or who have relatively mild symptoms have the ability to spread the virus to others. Their fellow students might then carry the virus home, spreading it to brothers and sisters, parents, and grandparents. If those family members are unvaccinated, they are at risk for severe illness and hospitalization while vaccinated family members can remain confident that their risk of severe illness is low.

Our healthcare system already is taxed, with one out of every four patients in the hospital with COVID-19. We're fighting hard to save their lives, while treating other Ohioans who need our help, like children with broken bones, people suffering from strokes, or those needing emergency care after a car accident. We can't do this alone. With Omicron spreading quickly through Ohio, we need everyone's help to make it through the coming weeks. Please help us by requiring students to wear masks when they return to school.

Sincerely,

Dawn Buskey
President, ProMedica Russell J. Ebeid Children's
Hospital

Steve Davis, MD
President & CEO, Cincinnati Children's Hospital
Medical Center

Patricia DePompei, RN, MSN
President, UH Rainbow Babies & Children's
Hospital

Deborah Feldman
President & CEO, Dayton Children's

Chris Gessner
President & CEO, Akron Children's Hospital

Rick Lofgren, MD
President & CEO, UC Health
Hospital Zone 3 Lead

Tim Robinson
CEO, Nationwide Children's Hospital

Andy Thomas, MD
Chief Clinical Officer and Co-Leader, The Ohio
State University Wexner Medical Center
Hospital Zone 2 Lead

Robert Wyllie, MD
Chief of Medical Operations, Cleveland
Clinic
Hospital Zone 1 Lead