



ULSTER COUNTY SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ULSTER COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

C/O Ulster BOCES
175 Route 32 North
New Paltz, NY 12561

November 2020

Dear Families of Ulster County:

Since mid-March, the year 2020 has been filled with challenges. Our routines have been altered and we have all had to adjust to the uncertainties of our world. This has not been an easy year for any one of us. Unfortunately, while there have been some initial promising reports about the availability of a vaccine to combat the COVID-19 virus, we have to be prepared for the reality that the beginning of 2021 will likely present us all with many of the same challenges.

As we planned for the 2020-2021 school year, our biggest concern was the delivery of a quality education to the over 24,000 students who attend our schools while supporting the health, safety and well-being of our students, staff and their families. Most schools opted for a combination of in-person, hybrid, and remote instruction to both keep our students in school and safe. **Our goal is to have a level of instruction so that schools can continue to provide all the services that Ulster County children need to be successful.** Collectively, we believe in the value of on-going instruction and related activities for educating the whole child.

In this letter we explain where we are seeing school-age cases and quarantined individuals, what the current data shows, why there is a need to work together for both our children and for our local economy, and what can happen if positive cases continue to rise.

Where we are seeing cases and quarantined individuals:

Most individuals associated with our schools that are currently in isolation or quarantine did not have exposure to COVID-19 at school. Rather these exposures happened outside of the school setting. Activities include while car-pooling, sleepovers, recreational contact sports and other types of social gatherings.

School Related Outbreaks:

During the first three months of this school year there have been relatively few school-based outbreaks in the schools of Ulster County. The partnership between the schools, the Ulster County Department of Health and our families have allowed us to quickly identify cases and to isolate and quarantine those exposed. We continue to rely on the cooperation from our families in reporting positive cases and in identifying close contacts.

What the Data shows:

- The better we are with our mitigation strategies, the longer we will be able to keep schools open and have children participate in ongoing instruction.
- When social distancing is practiced fewer students and staff must quarantine if there was a positive case in the school building.
- Masks have been shown to work at slowing the disease spread by about 70%. (Sources: Howard, J., Huang, A. et.al. 2020; Wang, Y., Tian, H., et.al. 2020: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Davies, A., Thompson, K., et.al., 2013)
- The Ulster County Department of Health has reported an increase in the number of positive cases across the county- mirroring the increase in positive cases in the region and the state in the recent weeks. This increase in cases suggest that the mitigation strategies and attention to reducing the spread of the COVID-19 virus have not been consistently practiced in many communities.

We need to work together to keep schools open - for our children and for the economy.

- Our goal is to sustain the best learning environment for our children as long as possible recognizing the challenges of community-based spread of COVID-19 as the reach of the virus continues to grow.
- We recognize that schools play a vital role in each of our communities, and we have seen that safely providing in-person or hybrid options wherever possible provides a benefit for the academic, social, emotional and physical well-being of our students and families.
- Having our schools open and providing in-person and/or hybrid instruction allows for parents and caregivers to keep attending work, thus sustaining our local economy.

Keeping school open is dependent on two actions:

- Mitigating the spread of COVID-19 within the walls of our school buildings and on each campus.
- Preventing the spread of COVID-19 in our communities.

If the rate of positive cases continues to trend upward, the Ulster County Department of Health warns that schools may be forced to implement additional protocols and restrictions to suppress the current rate of spread. These safety measures could mean limiting access to in-person instruction and, in the worst-case scenario a shift to fully remote learning across our districts.

It is essential that at this critical juncture that we all work together to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus in our communities with the same determination that allowed us to successfully open our schools this fall. **We all must follow the necessary protocols when out in public or when we are around others outside of the household that have worked to provide a safe environment in our schools: wear a mask, keep socially distant, and wash your hands frequently.** Continue to screen your children for the onset of symptoms before the start of each school day and keep them home if they are sick.

Our school families, community members, and you are important to us as we support health and safety precautions both within and outside of school. Thank you for your continued support, flexibility and demonstrated resilience during this challenging school year.



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Ulster County Executive



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