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Dear Wisconsin School Administrators,

We are experiencing an unprecedented surge in COVID-19 cases in Wisconsin as the Omicron variant spreads here in our state and across the globe. The seven-day average of new confirmed cases has increased nearly 150 percent in the past two weeks, with children under 18 representing the highest number of new cases. We must all continue working together to protect our students and school staff from COVID-19 so we can keep our students healthy and engaged in learning. Here are some steps your school/district can take in partnership with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and the Department of Health Services (DHS) to keep kids, teachers, and staff safe.

Sign Up to Participate in the DHS School-Based Testing Program

Testing remains a critical component of slowing the spread of COVID-19. Regular COVID-19 testing can help support schools in making decisions about their efforts to protect the health and well-being of those in their buildings. DHS has received federal funding to support school-based COVID-19 testing for teachers, staff, students, and their families for the 2021-2022 school year. This testing program is intended to help K-12 public, private, and independent charter schools provide safe and healthy learning environments by connecting them with appropriate program vendors to meet their testing needs. To initiate testing for students and staff, please visit the [DHS COVID-19: Schools webpage](#) for more information or email dhsk12covidtesting@dhs.wisconsin.gov.

If you are already participating in this testing program, be sure to utilize the [COVID-19 K-12 testing program communications toolkit](#) for resources to effectively communicate the benefits of the program to your communities. Other useful resources can also be found on the [COVID-19: K-12 School Testing Program webpage](#).

Isolation and Quarantine Strategies Remain Critical

On January 6, the Centers for Disease (CDC) updated [guidance for K-12 schools](#) to align with the updated [quarantine and isolation guidance](#). DHS supports these recommendations. CDC recommends a shortened isolation and quarantine period given what is known right now about COVID-19 and the Omicron variant. Science shows that the majority of SARS-CoV-2 transmission happens early in the illness, so CDC has shortened the recommended length of isolation from ten days to five days for people with COVID-19 who do not have any COVID-19 symptoms or symptoms have resolved or are improving after five days, followed by five days of wearing a [well-fitting mask](#) to minimize the risk of infecting others.

School districts should encourage students, teachers, and staff to get tested and isolate at home when they are sick, or quarantine if they have been in close contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19. Isolation and quarantine measures for individuals who are sick or exposed are necessary to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks in various settings, including schools. When isolation and quarantine measures are not implemented, COVID-19 can spread throughout a school and cause illness that could lead to prolonged school closures, increased hospitalizations, and deaths among vulnerable members of the school community.

DHS is preparing communication resources to help clarify updated CDC isolation and quarantine strategies. We will make these resources available on the DHS [K-12 Schools webpage](#).

Require Masks For Everyone in Schools

All students and staff who are able to properly and safely wear a mask should wear one, which will help support continued in-person learning. Studies show that a well-fitted, multi-layer face mask can [block the majority of respiratory droplets](#) from escaping into the air. Masks can also reduce the wearers' exposure to infectious droplets by effectively filtering them out of the air they breathe. Masks remain most effective when layered with other preventative measures like regular testing and vaccination.

DHS has a number of resources that can help schools communicate the importance of wearing masks in school settings, as well as answer many of the frequently asked questions about masking in schools. These resources are available in multiple languages.

- [Masks in Schools: What Families Need to Know](#)
- [Masks in Schools: Frequently Asked Questions and Considerations for Use](#)

If districts need KN95 or N95 masks and are not able to obtain them from other sources, they may be requested from the Department of Health Services stockpile. Instructions for submitting requests are available on the DHS [COVID-19: Personal Protective Equipment \(PPE\) page](#).

Offer School-Based Vaccination and Booster Clinics

All children ages 5 years and older are eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, and the CDC recommends everyone age 12 years and older receive a booster dose at least 5 months after completing their primary COVID-19 vaccine series. COVID-19 vaccines are safe, effective, and provide the best protection from getting seriously sick, being hospitalized, or dying from COVID-19. While children generally experience less serious symptoms from COVID-19 than do adults, hospitalizations among people under 18 are rising rapidly. Nearly all children and youth hospitalizations due to COVID-19 in Wisconsin and across the country are occurring among the unvaccinated.

Schools play an important role in COVID-19 prevention and are uniquely positioned to promote vaccine confidence and support COVID-19 vaccine uptake among students and families. School-located vaccination clinics help to make vaccination accessible to students in a setting that is familiar to them and their families. We encourage schools to hold vaccine clinics during drop-off and pick-up times and to offer vaccination to parents, guardians, and other family members.

To hold a school-based clinic, please communicate your interest to DHS by filling out the [vaccination clinic matching survey](#) and learn more on the [DHS COVID-19 vaccine partner resources webpage](#). [School-Located Vaccination Clinics: Best Practices for School Districts](#) provides guidance relating to roles and responsibilities, date and site selection, outreach, and hosting a clinic.

Everyone Can Help Stop the Spread of COVID-19

Implementation of multiple mitigation strategies will need to continue until disease transmission significantly decreases and there is greater COVID-19 vaccination coverage across the state. With the highly transmissible Omicron variant circulating rapidly through the state, **schools will need to follow recommended mitigation strategies, such as testing, isolation and quarantine, and mask wearing, even as vaccination coverage increases.**

Additional Resources

COVID-19 [Vaccination Community Outreach Grant](#) – Apply by January 14, 2021

DHS is seeking applications from organizations that are committed to reducing socioeconomic or health inequities in Wisconsin including: K-12 school or districts, organizations that are recognized as a 501(c)3 organization, or projects sponsored by another 501(c)3 organization or a local/tribal government entity. DHS will support grantee efforts to provide accurate, timely, and reliable information to build confidence in the safety and efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine and to reduce racial and geographic barriers to immunization. DHS will provide technical support, educational resources and materials, and public health guidance. Organizations that work with marginalized or medically underserved populations are encouraged to apply.

School Nursing Program

DPI and DHS are collaborating to bolster student access to health care by providing funding to support school nursing programs. DHS has hired a school health liaison position to coordinate with DPI, primarily DPI's School Nursing and Health Consultant, to support these resources. More information is forthcoming. Questions about the program can be directed to Stephanie Poling at Stephanie.Poling@dhs.wisconsin.gov.

Thank you for your continued leadership and dedication to keeping Wisconsin students, teachers, and staff safe during this time.

Sincerely,

The image shows two handwritten signatures in blue ink. The top signature is cursive and appears to be 'Stephanie Poling'. The bottom signature is also cursive and appears to be 'Ryan Westergaard'.

Paula Tran, State Health Officer and Administrator of the Division of Public

Ryan Westergaard, MD, PhD, Chief Medical Officer and State Epidemiologist for Communicable Diseases