

September 2, 2021



CHRIST ABOVE ALL THINGS

Good Parents and Students,

Peace be with you!

Yesterday was a landmark day at Grand Traverse Area Catholic Schools as our four Sisters led our faculty and staff in retreat. The day was filled with the joyful witness of the Sisters as they explained their life as Dominicans and shared their journeys toward complete abandonment to God. Not only did we receive Jesus in each other, but we began the day with the Holy Mass and ended it with Exposition!

At the same time, my inbox was filling up as it has been for weeks with parent e-mails: some pleased and others dismayed with the school's stance to allow masking to remain a family decision. It is to the point that I cannot respond to each family; therefore, I write this last communication before school begins.

The Divide

It is not an exaggeration to state that I open one e-mail that quotes both the Catechism and a Pope exhorting the school to mask our children, and the very next e-mail I open quotes from a different part of the Catechism and the same Pope urging the school to stand firm in its decision to allow parents to choose. The same happens with the medical and scientific arguments: one parent sends a study showing the efficacy of masks, while another parent sends a study showing there does not exist a statistically significant difference in masking and non-masking in schools. And it goes on as a parent cites an epidemiologist who lauds masks and their effectiveness in schools, while the next parent puts under my office door a different article by an epidemiologist who warns about the detrimental social, emotional, and medical impact of masks for students over time. One parent cites the increased cases in schools due to the variant and the next parent points to England and other European countries that are operating schools without masks. One parent sends me CDC language recommending masks while the next sends a WHO (World Health Organization) statement with a warning about masking for all students. And I could go on and on...

I want to acknowledge the earnestness of the parents as I know they write out of love for their children and concern for others. Furthermore, I want to recognize that there exist valid points morally, scientifically, and medically on both masking and non-masking. While acknowledging that the CDC, Health Department, and local pediatricians have recommended masking universally K-12, I also want to point out that there are local medical professionals who are on both sides of this argument. I certainly agree with the Diocese that these recommendations need to be thoughtfully considered by families as they make their masking decisions for this school year.

Masks Muddle Mission

It is personally very painful to watch families who should be making decisions on sending their children to school according to our mission making it due to masking policies. Again, I respect these decisions and know that they are doing what parents do – making the best decision for their children. Still, to gain a family because we don't mask or to lose a family because we do mask is not how it should be. Families should choose our school because they want their children to have an intimate relationship with Jesus while at the same time receiving outstanding academics. It could happen at any moment that a mandate for masking is instituted, and like all mandates, i.e., last year, we would follow it. Then the tables would turn, and the e-mails would be sent with anger and joy in the opposite way.

I apologize to the families put in this position, for I know it is not how we want to make decisions: We all want to make mission-based decisions.

What I am Responsible For

It has been pointed out many times that I am not a medical professional, and I am certainly not a moral theologian. I am an educator surrounded by other educators, and we have in consultation with others and after reading myriad articles, decided to make the best educational decision. There is no doubt that educating without masks is superior to educating with masks. Additionally, I have been told and have read that COVID-19 is likely to remain active with more variants to come for the next 3-5 years. When looking at health holistically -- spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and social well-being -- it seems imprudent to require masks for this period of time. The decision must be handed over to the parents at some point.

It is true that we are going against recommendations, but we have applied our minds, our understanding in this hotly debated situation and moved forward. I am reminded of several times in the last year and a half when we have used our best judgment even when it went against recommendations; for example, we had a graduation ceremony; we ran sports; we had prom; we started school back up after spring. I understand all of these instances as local decisions that we thought were the best for our community. I believe, in hindsight, these instances showed good judgement.

As a father, I am also responsible for six of the 1200 students personally. I am putting them into an environment with several mitigation strategies to provide protection against this virus and its new variants. I feel comfortable doing so. My love for my own children is the same as yours.

With Charity Toward All

I know that when Tuesday comes along, we will have masked and unmasked teachers, staff, and students. From our mission should flow a kindness that allows all to be comfortable. I know our teachers and principals will be sending this message.

Additionally, I ask our parents to refrain from asking teachers their vaccination status. Personal medical information is private and should be respected as such. Although vaccines are recommended by our diocese and Pope as an act of Charity, it is still a personal decision.

With malice toward none, with charity toward all is a mantra that I must repeat as we go forward by the Grace of God thanking Him in advance for the blessings of this new school year!

Peace and All Good,



Erick Chittle, Ph.D.
Interim Superintendent

cc: Pastors, Councils