

Dear Columbia Falls School District families and staff,

As you are probably aware, Governor Gianforte announced yesterday that he will be making changes to the statewide mask mandate as early as tomorrow. Additionally, we received confirmation this afternoon from the Governor's Office that ***"the upcoming directive allows local jurisdictions, including local school boards, to implement their own mask requirements."***

In collaboration with the School District 6 Board of Trustees, the Flathead County Health Director, and school leaders throughout the valley, we unanimously support continued safety protocols within our schools to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

As previously approved by the Board of Trustees, we will continue with ***all*** COVID-19 mitigation efforts, including the face covering requirement. We recognize and respect that there are varying viewpoints on this issue. As school leaders we are in a very challenging and sensitive position when making decisions concerning the health and safety of our staff and students. We view requiring face coverings within our schools as an issue of public health and safety.

Our rationale for continuing all mitigation efforts include:

- School staff, as essential workers, are no longer included in tier 1A and 1B for vaccinations. Removing the mask mandate when our school essential workers have not had the opportunity to be vaccinated presents additional risk to staff and students.
- Student and staff safety continues to be our number one priority. Mitigation of spread allows our schools to remain open, allows our parents to work, and keeps our economy up and running.
- Current school district data demonstrate that the mitigation efforts significantly reduce the spread and transmission of the Coronavirus when compared to overall data from Flathead County.
- According to the Flathead City-County Health Department, almost all cases of COVID in schools represent transmission from outside of the school setting due to the mitigation strategies that are currently in place.
- Schools often have "captive" audiences and difficulty maintaining social distancing. In addition, students and staff have a prolonged exposure time, which separates schools from regular businesses.

Thank you for your continuing support of our efforts to keep our schools open and to keep our students and staff safe. The risks associated with COVID-19 are continually being weighed with the potentially greater consequences for our students, families and community if our schools are closed. Therefore, we are doing everything we can to safely keep our schools open.

Sincerely,

Dave Wick
Superintendent
Columbia Falls School District 6