



January 20, 2022

Dear County Executive Marc Elrich, Dr. Bridgers, Dr. Stoddard, Montgomery County Board of Education, Dr. McKnight, and Montgomery County Councilmembers,

We acknowledge the tremendous challenges of this moment in keeping the largest school district in Maryland open while staying up-to-date on the rapidly evolving science of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the experience of being back in school thus far, **we urge you to implement stronger mitigation measures and more dynamic solutions to meet the diverse needs of our school community *moving forward***. The current public health and staffing crises necessitate these improvements.

While educational loss and mental health considerations are of concern for all students, the medically vulnerable and marginalized communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 have added burdens which have not been acknowledged. Many staff and students are medically vulnerable or have family members who are at higher risk for severe COVID-19, including children under age five who are ineligible for vaccination. MCPS cannot leave these groups behind. For children as with adults, there is also the risk of hospitalization and the potential of prolonged illness ([long COVID](#)), which remains incompletely characterized. [Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children \(MIS-C\)](#), a serious post-infectious complication, occurs in children and young adults, manifests weeks after infection, often in children who had no or minimal COVID-19 symptoms. For these reasons, a precautionary approach is warranted.

We, in partnership with the MCCPTA Health & Wellness Committee, composed of doctors, airborne infectious disease specialists, public health scientists, community advocates, educators, parents, and students, recommend the following to restore more effective learning environments. Our recommendations account for CDC and Maryland guidance, the high vaccination rates in Montgomery County, the highly contagious nature of the omicron variant, existing staffing shortages, and the need for clear, well-communicated, predictable plans. These recommendations should be implemented immediately.

1. Ensure More Equitable Policies

- Excuse all COVID-related absences through resolution of this surge and remove the burden of case-by-case approval at the school level.
- Provide specific support for families of children who need learning support, social services, meals, and childcare when not attending in person.
- Provide additional mitigation resources for all schools to support higher risk staff and students attending school in person.

2. Ensure Stable, Meaningful Instruction

We expect MCPS to ensure that there are sufficient qualified teachers and staff to provide safe and meaningful instruction to all students.

- Develop and share metrics to determine operational viability to remain open in person. These metrics should be prespecified and deemed acceptable by all key stakeholders, especially teachers.
- Provide a high quality virtual instruction option for all students who are isolating, quarantining, or prefer to learn virtually for COVID-related concerns. Low quality virtual options may disincentivize participation in COVID-19 testing programs.

3. Improve Testing and Quarantine Protocols

Limit in-school transmission and quarantine-related loss of learning through more robust testing, provided by MCPS and DHHS [per CDC guidance](#).

- Clarify Quarantine Protocol
 - Contact trace and report both antigen and PCR positive results.
 - Update quarantine protocol for symptomatic students and for staff and students that have “positivity” in the home.
 - Test all close contacts of the index case irrespective of vaccination status.
- Establish a district-wide Test to Stay program
 - Expand the current pilot program to all schools.
- Expand Asymptomatic Random Screening/Surveillance PCR Testing
- Test to Return Safer
 - While in high or substantial transmission after any period of closure longer than 4 days (ie spring break) ALL students and staff provide results of negative COVID-19 test **PRIOR** to return to in-person learning.
- Increase data transparency
 - Data on the COVID-19 Dashboard should be in one place and tracked over time.
 - Provide notification of positive cases at the classroom level.

We reemphasize that high quality virtual instruction for students in quarantine is essential to improve acceptance of testing and reporting of results.

4. Improve Current Mitigation

- Create target metrics and guidance to expand outdoor dining at all schools.
- Update guidance for mitigation and physical distancing, and enhance ventilation and filtration when students are in high-risk areas (cafeteria, music, gymnasiums).
- Verify current ventilation by implementing CO₂ monitoring in all classrooms and shared spaces.
- Provide appropriately sized high filtration masks for all staff and students.
- Have a clear contact tracing algorithm for identifying and testing close contacts of index cases. Make this algorithm publicly available.
- For highest risk activities during this surge (e.g. band, highly aerobic exercise, chorus)
 - practice strict mitigation efforts (including custom masking or move class outdoors).
 - When such adjustments are not possible, activities should be deferred.
 - Student absences should be excused from these activities if they feel unsafe.

The evolving nature of the pandemic necessitates a dynamic approach based on the most current science and data. While vaccination and boosters for those eligible is the most important mitigation measure to prevent severe illness from COVID-19, additional tools are required to reduce transmission. **High filtration masks, sufficient ventilation, outdoor dining, robust COVID-19 testing and providing for meaningful, safe instruction** are critically important to keep our students, teachers and staff safe and in school.

We are happy to meet and discuss our recommendations with you in more detail. Please contact Hannah Donart, Chair of the MCCPTA Health and Wellness Committee at healthandwellness@mccpta.org.

Sincerely,

Board of Directors
MCCPTA