

August 21, 2020

RE: UPMC Cole Letters of Exemption for Masking

Dear School Administrators,

We are writing to you regarding Governor Wolf's direction that children are expected to wear cloth face coverings at most times in school when it opens in the next few weeks. We have had a number of parent requests for letters of exemption to mask-wearing for their children, in some cases at the direction of their school administrators. We would like to share with you our position: we support the use of cloth face coverings to protect children, teachers, and staff in school settings as they are a proven, effective way to prevent the spread of COVID 19. They can be safely worn by all children 2 years of age and older, including the vast majority of children with underlying health conditions, with rare exception. Children are resilient and easily adaptable. Once mask-wearing becomes normalized, most children will adapt. Masks can be safely worn for extended periods of time, including during the school day.

We are attaching the American Academy of Pediatrics' most recent Guidance for School Re-entry, dated August 19, 2020. The guidelines reinforce the AAP's position that children belong in the classroom if it is safe based on the risk of COVID 19 in their community. Since we are very fortunate at this time to have a low rate of COVID 19 infection in our community, that means that all children should be able to return to school. As you can see, strategies for mitigating risk of infection vary by age, reflecting both what is known about transmission risk of COVID 19 at different ages, as well as, reasonable expectations based on chronologic and developmental age.

For children with significant cognitive or behavioral disabilities who may have more difficulty adjusting to wearing a cloth face covering, we recommend that parents be encouraged to have their children practice wearing their masks at home. We also suggest that schools incorporate the process of learning to wear a face covering into the child's IEP, making it a goal rather than an expectation on the first day of school. Since our current community rate of COVID 19 is low, we recommend that these children be allowed to attend school while working on wearing their face masks.

Finally, we strongly recommend that all adults at the school adhere strictly to universal cloth face coverings at all times and avoid close proximity to each other.

We recognize that school attendance is fundamental to child and adolescent development and wellbeing and provides our children and adolescents with academic instruction, social and emotional skills, safety, reliable and healthy nutrition, physical/occupational/speech therapy, mental health services, and opportunities for

physical activity, among other benefits. Thank you for all the effort and hard work you have put into bringing our community's children back to school!

Please feel free to contact us with any questions or concerns about our overall recommendations or about specific children.

Sincerely,



Mary Ann Rigas, M.D.
On behalf of the Medical Staff at UPMC Cole

Bowman Health Center.....	814.887.5395
Central Potter Health Center.....	814.274.5577
Coudersport Pediatrics.....	814.274.9198
Eldred Health Center.....	814.225.4241
Emporium Health Center.....	814.486.0810
Galeton Health Center.....	814.435.2942
Internal Medicine.....	814.274.5276
Northern Potter Health Center.....	814.848.7555
Port Allegany Community Health Center.....	814.642.2505
Shinglehouse Community Health Center.....	814.260.9352
Westfield Health Center.....	814.367.5971