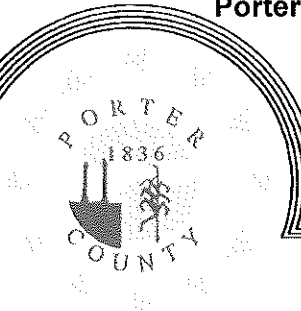


COUNTY-PORTER



Porter County Health Department

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M. L. Stamp, M. D.

Health Officer

July 17, 2020

Dear Porter County Superintendents,

The Health Department nurses have reviewed school reopening plans for all the public school districts and many of the private schools within Porter County. We have been pleased with the care and creativity taken to ensure a plan for healthy students and employees.

One area where I have concerns is the language used in reference to mask wear (masks and face coverings will be used interchangeably in this letter). Most plans are worded such that the use of face coverings is up to individual teachers, or just recommended. This has caused great concerns among both parents and staff. We understand that the culture of wearing face coverings will be more difficult to develop in the younger classes and may be near impossible in certain settings, eg. some SELF school classes.

That said, however, the growing body of scientific evidence is tipping toward the benefit of wearing masks when in group settings like schools. We are seeing that children in day camps where masks are mandatory are finding it possible, even in the younger ages, to learn to wear masks most of the day without ill effect. To those who would say that masks are touched and become soiled during the day, I would respond that the protection afforded from respiratory droplets significantly outweighs the risk of disease spread from touching the mask, especially if hands are frequently washed. Also, as students become more accustomed to wearing face coverings, they will be touched and adjusted less frequently.

A comprehensive plan for school to open safely needs to include the requirement or expectation that face coverings be worn throughout the school day by students and staff. It is reasonable to schedule mask-free time during the day, perhaps at recess or during very quiet study or test time, but not during general class time where discussions cause teachers to speak out to the back row or students turn to look at those responding to questions. The small number of situations where face coverings might be removed should be defined if possible to limit confusion. We can create the expectation that masks will be worn in school and can be tolerated during the school day. Consistent wear of masks in our schools, along with rigorous social distancing may be the only way schools successfully reopen for significant stretches of time during the 2020-2021 school year.

Thank you for all the very hard work you have been doing to make your schools as safe as possible.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Maria L Stamp".

Maria L Stamp, MD

Health Officer

Porter County Health Department