

August 6, 2021

Dear Montana District Superintendents and Trustees,

As we all prepare for students to return to the classroom for the 2021-2022 school year, we join parents, students, and educators in looking forward to a return to normalcy in learning for those whose lives and educational opportunity were disrupted over the last 17 months.

As we have heard from hundreds of parents across Montana, it is critical our kids get back into the classroom in as normal a setting as possible so they may learn, develop, and grow.

As you know, the Montana Constitution grants elected boards of trustees in each school district the supervision and control of schools. As such, we urge you to refer to two key sources as you prepare to decide what environment Montana's kids will encounter when they return to their classroom.

First, we urge you to ensure the voices of Montana parents and families are heard before making decisions about children going back to school, particularly decisions regarding universal masking of students. We have heard from parents throughout the state who are concerned about the impact of universal masking on their kids' academic, emotional, and social development, particularly for elementary-aged students and students with disabilities and who believe strongly that wearing face masks and other coverings should be optional, voluntary, and a matter of family choice.

Second, we encourage you to refer to data from the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) as you consult with local health departments on any decisions. DPHHS officials have data on the virus' transmission rates among school-age children, as well as incidents of severe complications from the virus among children, including hospitalizations and death.

As you are aware, safe, effective COVID-19 vaccines have been available at no cost to all Montanans 16 years and older, including teachers and school administrators, since April 1, 2021. We continue to encourage Montanans who have not been vaccinated to consult with their health care provider about getting a vaccine. Parents are the primary decision makers for their children's health matters, and they must be at the center of any discussions on vaccinations.

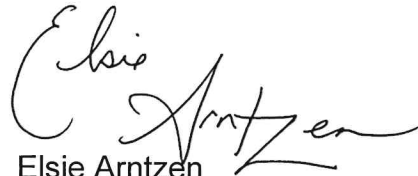
While the CDC has repeatedly changed its mask recommendations over the last 16 months, trustees and superintendents should give due consideration to available data and the voices of Montana parents as it relates to whether their children are required to wear masks in schools.

As you consider how students will safely enter their classroom, know that we want this school year to be a success for our students, educators, and parents. We are here to help you as partners in any way we can. Our doors are always open; please reach out to us as you continue putting Montana students first.

Sincerely,



Greg Gianforte
Governor



Elsie Arntzen
Superintendent of Public Instruction