

### **Mask Up Until All Kids Are Protected**

The Charleston County Medical Society was established in 1952, with a School Health Committee to advise the school district about issues regarding health. Our committee of doctors, school staff and community members has been meeting faithfully for these past 69 years and has a close relationship with the Charleston County School District (CCSD). Over time we have addressed needs such as increasing the number of school nurses, improving nutrition, and increasing physical activity. However, during this past year during the COVID-19 pandemic our schools have faced health challenges that are unprecedented.

Not everyone realizes how exceptionally well CCSD did last year. Our schools were able to stay open all year, something that did not happen in most communities. The reason was that CCSD carefully followed the 300-page playbook of COVID-19 mitigation strategies developed for them by the Medical University of South Carolina Back 2 Business team. In addition, CCSD nurses vaccinated over 6,000 staff and students. As a result, we had scarcely any COVID cases transmitted at school. In other words, kids and teachers were protected from COVID while at school. In fact, wearing masks, sanitizing, and keeping at a safe distance worked so well that it also prevented the common infections, such as strep throat and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). And kids adjusted to these new school routines, which over time became the new normal.

However, even though we are all tired of this pandemic, the battle is not over. Just as school reopens, we are at the beginning of another spike, this time with the Delta variant which is more contagious and deadly. People who are unvaccinated are at particular risk, which is most children. Children under age 12 can't get vaccinated at this time. The only way to protect kids is what worked so well last year: wear a mask, wash your hands, and stay at a safe distance.

#### **Reasons to stay masked up until all kids are protected from COVID-19:**

- **Kids are vulnerable:** Those under 12 can't yet get vaccinated; while the elderly were originally the most at-risk group, now it is kids
- **COVID is a serious illness even for kids:** While most recover, some do not. Kids have been in the intensive care unit on life support and even died from COVID-19. Also, COVID causes vascular damage of hearts, brains and other organs which may result in long term health problems
- **Other fragile people may become infected:** Kids spread contagion amongst themselves and then take it home to their families where family members at high-risk due to age or underlying health conditions may become infected
- **The longer it takes to get rid of COVID-19 the more it mutates:** The COVID-19 pandemic began when coronavirus mutated from causing the common cold to a more serious illness. As long as it passes around our community, the virus continues to constantly mutate, sometimes into a worse version such as the Delta variant.

- **It's the kind thing to do:** Surely wearing a mask is a small kindness that we can do for our neighbors, many of whom have some reason to be especially fearful such as a new baby or a relative with cancer.

As we start a new school year, we urge our community to stay strong and not give up these proven strategies too soon. Together we can take care of each other and end this pandemic.

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