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August 5, 2020

Dear Superintendents,

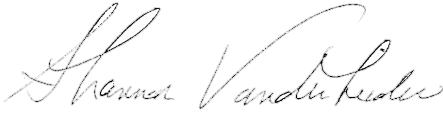
As the school year quickly approaches, I want to congratulate you on the attention and concern you are demonstrating for your students, your staff and for the larger community as we work together as a team to return our children to the classroom. There is no doubt how important it is to do all that we can to ensure a safe return to school. Our school children have been asked to endure a once in a hundred-year pandemic with little warning. I congratulate each of your districts for the way you filled the void last spring for our youngsters by being innovative, creative and engaged. As communities, I believe there is consensus that we place the highest priority on getting our children back to school and keeping them there. Thank you for your diligent work on making this priority possible.

As cases continue to increase in our health district, I am alert to the reality that the return to school presents additional challenges as we try to mitigate the spread of this highly contagious virus. The most reliable and best science continues to prove that masks/face coverings are a simple and effective public health measure to minimize the spread of the COVID-19 disease. Face coverings have a long history in public health as a best practice for controlling outbreaks of respiratory disease. Even with the hard work we have done together, without compliance with public health measures in their entirety, I am concerned that it will not be enough. As we monitor the spread of the virus in other areas, there is not only scientific research to prove the importance of masks in public spaces, particularly indoors, there are a number of empirical accounts regarding the issue, both in terms of positive results when masks are worn and the negative consequences of situations when masks would have made a difference. I am invested in the success of our school re-openings and want our schools to be the success stories our communities can point to as models in how to bring children back to the classroom safely during a pandemic. In that vein, I am asking, as a public health official, that you require faculty, staff, students and visitors to faithfully wear masks/face coverings.

I understand that the issue of masks and their value is confusing and that there is significant misinformation and political controversy surrounding this time-tested public health measure that dates back over a century. I can tell you with confidence that the science is clear that community spread is mitigated when there is consistent compliance. It is my fervent hope that we usher in the school year and that our staff and students can remain there to do the work of learning and growing.

Once again, thank you for the hard work you have done in this incredibly difficult time and the leadership you provide to your districts. Your willingness to mandate masks will go a long way in allowing our students to stay in school where they can thrive and our teachers to do the irreplaceable work of educating those students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shannon Vanderheiden". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Shannon Vanderheiden  
Executive Director of West Central District Health Department