



January 14, 2022

Dear Helena Public Schools Families and Staff,

I write today to ask for your help.

Omicron is now upon us. And while it is different from previous variants, it's far more contagious and every bit as disruptive. How we fare as a community will depend on how well we work together to keep our schools open, keep parents at work, keep businesses open and – most critically – keep hospitals and clinics open for those who need care.

So, here is my ask:

Please wear a mask for the next few weeks. I am certainly aware that many in our community are growing tired of masking, and that includes me. However, the highly infectious nature of Omicron, coupled with the shortage of rapid testing supplies, makes masking essential to keep schools open through the surge.

I'm asking for your help – not mandating at this time – to keep our schools open by masking. Omicron is expected to surge and drop off more quickly than its predecessors; this is a short-term ask to help us avoid the crises of closed schools and overcrowded hospitals happening elsewhere. Please send your student to school with a mask. Three-layer cloth masks and paper masks are available at your school, if needed.

Stay home if you're sick. In order to keep our schools, businesses, and healthcare facilities open, we need healthy staff and students. Please don't spread illness to others at work or school.

Become a substitute teacher or para educator. We need adults to help support and fill our staffing needs throughout the district. What we are seeing at schools across the country is that Omicron is taking a toll on staffing. We need all hands on deck to support our schools as this variant passes through our community.

If you have a flexible schedule, please consider helping your school through the coming weeks as a substitute teacher, para educator or playground monitor. If you can volunteer, please call Jacqueline Young with Helena Public Schools Human Resources at (406) 324-2011. If you're interested in substitute teaching, please visit the [Human Resources page on the district website](#).

Get vaccinated. If you haven't already, please talk with your physician, pediatrician, or school nurse about vaccination. The Lewis and Clark Department of Public Health is holding a vaccination clinic tomorrow, Jan. 15, at East Helena High School, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. First, second, and booster shots will be offered for those 12 and older. [Click here to schedule an appointment.](#) For additional information, visit the [Lewis and Clark County COVID-19 HUB.](#)

Give blood. The American Red Cross announced this week that a nationwide blood shortage is the worst in more than a decade. [Visit American Red Cross Blood Services](#) to donate or learn more.

Test, but test judiciously: Due to a shortage of COVID tests statewide and nationally, health officials are asking individuals to test five days after they last had close contact with someone with COVID-19 or if they are symptomatic. Visit the [CDC's testing information page](#) to see exceptions and more detailed information. In response to the shortage, the district is temporarily suspending our evening drive-through COVID testing clinics, meaning next week's scheduled clinics at the Lincoln Center are cancelled. **The district will continue to test students and staff who become symptomatic during the school day and will resume drive-through testing clinics as soon as supplies are available.**

In another adjustment to the arrival of Omicron, Helena Public Schools nursing staff will no longer conduct contact tracing. It is no longer realistic or a good use of resources to chase COVID. The new variant simply moves too fast. Here again, the emphasis is on prevention and using the tools available to protect yourself, your family, and the community.

Lewis and Clark County reported its first known Omicron cases on January 3, and local healthcare officials have advised that the next two weeks will be pivotal. A return to mask-required status remains a strong possibility. However, I view mask mandates as a last resort.

I strongly believe we'll be most successful if we work together, voluntarily, to keep schools open because that's what we all want. Let's all pull on the same rope and do everything we can for each other, for our schools, and for our community.

As we enter a short week book-ended by two long weekends, I hope you're able to find time to recharge and take care of yourself.

Respectfully,



Rex Weltz
Superintendent, Helena Public Schools