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August 3, 2021

Dear Governor DeSantis,

First, I would like to thank you for ensuring our schools opened last fall. While many schools across the country remained closed, schools in Florida kept their doors open. Given the circumstances, what we accomplished last year was remarkable.

When school ended last June, I announced to our community that masks would become optional for summer programs in Leon County and would remain optional when our students returned to begin the new school year this August. Given the totality of the circumstances at the end of the school year, I completely agreed with your position that families should make their own mask wearing decisions.

Governor DeSantis there were two driving factors that lead me to make that decision in June:

First, data did not reflect that the virus was having a serious negative health impact on our school-aged children. Over the course of the entire school year we had just over 800 in-person students test positive for COVID-19. Over the same period of time, there were zero hospitalizations of children 5 to 11, four hospitalizations of children 12 to 18, and zero deaths. The data also proved that school-aged children were not spreading the Coronavirus-19 to other members of their family- as once feared.

The second reason that impacted my decision to allow for optional mask wearing was the social and emotional impact that wearing masks was having on our students. I visited every one of our 42 school campuses during both the fall and spring. I saw the light in our students' eyes dim over the course of the year. In fact, our internal data reflected an uptick in mental health referrals.

I have spent the better part of the summer steadfastly informing my community of these two facts as the rationale for optional masking in the fall. Publicly, I have said many times that it was my decision and that I was in complete agreement with you.

Governor, over the past two weeks, it has become clear that the Delta variant and its effect on school-age children is very different than the original Alpha version of the virus. What scientists learn about the Delta variant continues to grow; however, we already know that the Delta variant is significantly more contagious than the Alpha variant.

Complicating matters is that our classrooms will be much denser this year than last year. Many more parents will be sending their children to in-person learning this August. We will make every effort to socially distance as much as possible; however, it will be challenging.

Over the last 60 days, I have stood firm in my belief that a mask mandate was the wrong course of action. With that said, I believe that new data and information as well as student instructional models compels us to rethink mask protocols. School-wide mask wearing is a proven, mitigating strategy to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

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In the last ten days alone, before school has even opened, four school-aged children in Leon County have been admitted to local hospitals. Two of our Pre-K teachers are currently in the Intensive Care Unit at one of our local hospitals. According to local health officials, cases of positive, symptomatic minors are skyrocketing. Our county positivity rate is above 14% and, three times higher compared to August of last year. I cannot ignore our latest local data and information.

I have said throughout this process that my decisions would be guided by science and local health data. This week I have met with our principals, health experts, doctors, local leaders, parents, and students. These conversations have informed my current position regarding Leon County Schools and masks.

Governor, please understand that districts across the State of Florida have their own local communities to answer to in a different manner than you. They say all politics is local. **I'm asking you to allow us the flexibility and the autonomy to make the decisions for our schools that best fit our local data and information in Leon County. At this time, we would like to implement a temporary mask requirement in grades Pre-K—8, in order to help reduce the community positivity rate.** These students are most vulnerable as they are not yet eligible to be vaccinated.

One size doesn't fit all 67 counties and 2.6 million students. Just as you stand up for the sovereignty of the State of Florida from federal mandates and executive orders, I too must advocate on behalf of my community and my school children.

We do not know each other personally, but I am sure we both entered public service because we wanted to help make our community, our state and our country a better place. Like you, I am a product of our public schools. I have dedicated my entire career to education and helping children succeed in life. One thing has always guided every decision I have ever made—the safety and well-being of our children.

It is the challenge of every leader to not allow pride or politics to cloud our better judgement, and to be guided by community input, science and experts in the field. Because the COVID-19 landscape continues to evolve, as Superintendent, I'm learning that no matter how far you may have gone down a road, it is never too late to turn back and make a choice that is best for the community as a whole.

Given the Delta variant and the science emerging from it, I am urging you to join me in helping to keep our children safe from COVID-19, and to allow school districts the autonomy to choose what is best for their community.

Sincerely,



Rocky Hanna

Superintendent, Leon County Schools

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