



BERRIEN COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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For Immediate Release

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Berrien County Health Department Issues Public Health Order Requiring Face Masks in Educational Settings

Face masks required for all individuals in indoor Pre-K- grade 12 school settings starting Sept.

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(Benton Harbor, MI) --- The Berrien County Health Department has issued a public health order requiring the use of face masks by individuals in pre-Kindergarten through grade 12 indoor educational settings, regardless of vaccination status to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The order will be effective Monday, Sept. 6 and will remain in effect until community transmission is categorized as “low” or “moderate” for a period of 21 consecutive days and no increase has been observed in hospitalizations and deaths during that same period. The order requires:

- All educational institutions or settings in Berrien County to ensure all students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 properly and consistently wear a face mask while inside any closed building or structure regardless of vaccination status. This includes preschools, primary, secondary and vocational schools, youth camps and programs, childcare and tutoring centers, colleges, universities and other organized activities outside of the home where coursework is taught.
- All educational institutions or settings to ensure individuals who provide service to students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 properly and consistently wear a face mask while inside any building or structure regardless of vaccination status.

“Our top priority is keeping students in school for in-person learning. With the rapid increases in COVID-19 transmission over the past month, it is imperative that we take this action to keep students and teachers healthy and safe in the classroom,” said Courtney Davis, acting health officer for the Berrien County Health Department. “While we are still learning about the potential impacts of the highly-contagious Delta variant that is present in Berrien County, what we do know is that masking is one of the best defenses against COVID-19 transmission.”

The Berrien County Health Department issued the public health order after thorough evaluation of local, regional, and state data and conditions. Under the [Michigan Public Health Code](#), local public health officers are authorized to “take actions and make determinations necessary or appropriate to carry out the local health department’s functions to protect the public health and prevent disease.”

Currently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have indicated Berrien County is at high risk of COVID-19 transmission, especially the Delta variant. Berrien County's seven-day cumulative [case rate](#) is 167.5 per 100,000 persons, which represents an average of 37 new cases per day for the period of August 24 through August 30. The county's seven-day average [test positivity rate](#) has climbed to 12.7 percent.

Studies of COVID-19 incidence in school districts during the 2020-21 school year show proper masking is the most effective mitigation strategy to prevent secondary transmission in schools. Masking is part of a multi-layered approach to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. Other preventative measures include immunization, social distancing, good hand hygiene, staying home when sick and following isolation and quarantine guidelines to limit the spread of COVID-19.

“With less than 35% of adolescents ages 12-19 fully vaccinated and those younger than 12 without the opportunity to receive the vaccine, further action is needed to protect the health of all individuals in our school systems,” said Dr. Rex Cabaltica, medical director for the Berrien County Health Department.

The health department's public health order does not apply to the following individuals:

- Those actively eating or drinking.
- Persons participating in activities outdoors.
- Children under the age of four (4) years, although supervised masking is recommended for those age two (2) and older.
- Neurodivergent students of any age attending school, although supervised masking is encouraged.
- Teachers who are working with children who are hard of hearing or neurodivergent students and where masking would inhibit instruction. These teachers or staff should be fully vaccinated persons or comply with masking directive.
- Persons who have a current medical reason confirmed in writing from a board-certified Medical Doctor (MD) or Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO) currently licensed to practice medicine.

To read the [full public health order](#) and for more information about the Berrien County Health Department's response to COVID-19, visit <http://www.bchdmi.org/1695/Public-Health-Orders>.

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