



Date: March 08, 2021

To: Stephenville Independent School Board

From: Joel Massey, MD, MPH
Medical Director, Public Health Region 2/3
Texas Department of State Health Services

As a representative of the health department and primary provider of public health services for Erath County, I am grateful for this opportunity to share my perspective. First, as a native friendly Texan, I feel obligated to tell you who I am and what I do. I grew up and went to school in Texas. After medical school I served on active duty in the US Air Force for 10 years as a family physician. I also worked for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as an Epidemic Intelligence Service Officer. I have deployed all over the world, including a nine-month tour of duty in Afghanistan. I have witnessed many ways that different people across this nation and across the globe address some surprisingly similar human problems of balancing community needs for safety, health, and individual freedom.

I came back home to my beloved Texas to work at DSHS because I want to serve the hard-working people who have made me who I am. Public Health Region 2/3 includes 49 counties from the Red River down to Abilene, on east out to Corsicana. I routinely leverage my board-certified expertise in family medicine, general preventive medicine and public health to address public health issues in the region. I have certificates in international medicine, tropical medicine, travel medicine and hygiene, as well as HIV medicine.

None of these qualifications give me the right to tell your community what you must do within your independent school district. I have school-age children who wear a mask all day every day at school, but that does not qualify me to tell you what your children must do. Incidentally, my 4th grader, who absolutely adores his homeroom teacher, told me the other day, "Dad, after we finally beat COVID, I still think I should wear a mask if I have to go to school with a cough or runny nose, because I don't want my teacher to get sick and miss out on perfect attendance."

Here is what I can tell you: I can offer you some sound medical advice based on public health science. The public health science tells us that wearing a

mask reduces the risk of community transmission of respiratory disease. If you are still undecided about whether it works, just ask your neighbors if they noticed we have not seen much influenza this winter? The public health science tells us that when we stay vigilant about washing our hands, watching our distance, and wearing our masks, our vulnerable friends and family are less likely to get sick, our hospitals are less likely to get overrun, and even if we do individually come in contact with a virus, we're less likely to get infected or infect someone else.

The Texas Education Agency was unequivocal in their guidance to maintain current hygiene practices and require masks among school staff and students. DSHS also encourages hospitals, businesses, and schools to continue observing these public health precautions to lower our risk of spreading the newer variant strains of COVID-19 that we have started to find in north Texas. We know these variant strains are here, and that they spread more easily and may cause more severe illness. We don't know yet if the vaccines alone will work well enough to prevent these strains from initiating another massive outbreak wave that threatens to crush our health care capacity.

It's too early to give up on encouraging and enforcing good hygiene habits like wearing a mask. The evidence I have seen does not substantiate any claims that wearing a mask hurts people, otherwise all my surgeon friends from medical school would be sick by now instead of riding expensive horses on big Texas ranches.

What I learned in my travels is that every community is different, and each community is governed by different values. Our diversity of perspectives in Texas is part of what I love about raising my family here. I have faith that Stephenville community leaders and School Board members will listen to everyone's perspective before a decision is made. I anticipate the Board will make the best decision for the community, but I hope the public health science will inform the Board's decision as much as it informs my professional recommendations. Please retain the mask requirement as recommended by DSHS and the Texas Education Agency.

Respectfully,



cc: Dr. Kelly Doggett, Stephenville Health Authority