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**Scott Kuykendall**

*Superintendent of Schools  
and Executive Secretary to the Board*

**Mary Ann Sanders**, *Chairperson*  
**Chinyere Nnodim-Jack**, *Vice Chairperson*  
**Alice J. Pollard**, *Member*  
**Kim A. Rose**, *Member*  
**Kimberly Spina**, *Member*

**Date:** February 24, 2022

**To:** Members of the California State Legislature - Stanislaus County Delegation  
Governor Gavin Newsom

**Re:** *COVID-19 Impact on Schools and Move to Endemic*

We write to you expressing our concerns about COVID-19 and its impact on education in Stanislaus County. The mandates and restrictions have taken over all aspects of our roles as educators, and more importantly, our students. We will not fully understand the impact of COVID-19 for years to come.

This dialogue is urgent, and with only three and a half months of the school year remaining, our school communities are prepared to transition through the latest surge, and move from pandemic to endemic. To best serve the community, we recommend returning decision-making to local educational agencies, letting us establish the vision and structure for teaching and learning in that new environment.

The 25 school districts in Stanislaus County serve more than 108,000 children in TK-12 schools and thousands of younger children in early childhood programs. We employ thousands of credentialed and classified staff with a high population of English language learners and a significant population with special needs.

Despite CDPH and CalOSHA's continually changing guidance, schools have managed the challenging surges. School and district staff are not medical experts, yet they are increasingly overwhelmed attending to the health mitigation practices including: strategies, contact tracing, masking mandates, COVID testing plans and implementation, isolation, quarantine, testing responsibilities, and communication.

Enforcement of mandates creates a negative climate that negatively impacts teachers' ability to teach and limits quality instruction while diminishing students' curricular and extracurricular opportunities. Mental health has never been more critical than now. The mandates exacerbate staff and students' inability to cope. In October 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared a national children's mental health emergency.

We can put children on a healthier path by fully normalizing their school environment immediately. The two most important steps are allowing children to learn and socialize unmasked and to halt asymptomatic testing. Without changes, this further continues students on the path of learning loss, social stigma, exclusion from extracurricular activities, and heightened anxiety, as symptom-free children are required to isolate and quarantine at home.

Stanislaus County Public Health recognizes that the Omicron variant spread widely throughout the county in late December, peaking in the second week of January. Since then, our case rates have continued to decrease rapidly. Many people are now protected against severe disease, either by vaccination, or from previous (COVID-19) infection. Those at risk for severe disease have had the opportunity to receive a vaccination. Fortunately, children are less likely to develop severe disease with COVID-19, and all children aged five years and older are eligible to receive the vaccine.

According to California Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Mark Ghaly, "Masking mandates were never put in place to be there forever — it's not a question of if, it's a question of when." The detrimental consequences of face masks for learning and development should not be ignored. There are more than 1 million English language learners in California public schools whose education is disproportionately impacted by face masks, given the importance of lip reading and relying on facial expressions when learning a second language. Over 100,000 students with speech and learning challenges are at an additional disadvantage because of face mask use.

We fully understand the complexity and intensity of the emergency and, as such, make the following recommendations, as we believe these will contribute to the overall safety, wellbeing, and education of our students:

- Establish dialogue with school districts about the pivot to living in the coming era of endemic, which could begin as early as spring 2022. Build upon relationships forged during the crisis and support schools in their mission of teaching and supporting the needs of students.
- Provide relaxation of mask mandates for children while in the learning environment. Support local control of mask requirements with school districts and public health agencies.
- Align CDPH and CalOSHA guidance on isolation and quarantine rules or establish CalOSHA exemptions for the education sector to mirror the CDPH guidance that allows staff to return safely while maintaining health and safety precautions.

- Eliminate, reduce, or fully transition responsibility for COVID-19 testing, isolation, and quarantine to the healthcare and insurance providers or public health sector as appropriately defined. Schools can provide venues and access, but other persons, agencies, or entities should be responsible for intake, notifications, guidance, and tracing. We understand this may require additional capacities such as recruitment efforts to staff these operations or a reimagining of state policy. Expanding access to over-the-counter COVID-19 testing kits for individuals and families to access, coupled with a policy change would greatly relieve the systems.
- Make the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program more flexible with an extended timeline and allowance of carryover funds, so there is no missed opportunity to provide these supports to our students.
- Provide a reprieve from chronic absenteeism accountability given the skewed data resulting from the COVID-19 impact. Chronic absenteeism data will reflect days missed due to COVID-19.

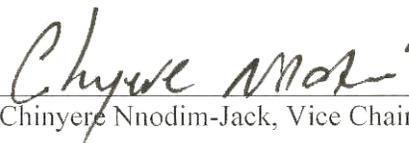
We appreciate your immediate consideration of our recommendations. Working together, we can stem further learning loss by swiftly placing our children in a normalized school environment.



Scott Kuykendall, Secretary to the Stanislaus County Board of Education and County Superintendent of Schools



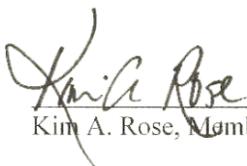
Mary Ann Sanders, Chairperson



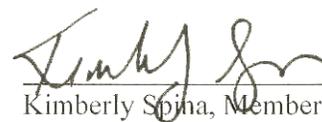
Chinyere Nnodim-Jack, Vice Chairperson



Alice J. Pollard, Member



Kim A. Rose, Member



Kimberly Spina, Member

The following school districts support these recommendations for schools to move to Endemic protocols:

