



September 2, 2021

Dear Families, Faculty, Staff, Administrators, School pastors and Board members,

Over the past several days, the Catholic Schools Office and school administrators have heard from people who oppose the mandate issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Health requiring all students and staff in Pre-K-12 schools to wear masks. As you are aware, we issued a statement on August 20 listing several recommendations for schools entering the 2021-22 academic year. Among them: “All schools will be required to follow mandates that may be issued from government agencies, including masking.”

I stand firmly behind this decision. We are doing this for the health and welfare of our students, faculty, staff and administrators, and our lawyers have confirmed the mandate is a legally binding order.

I am aware of the strong opinions for and against mask wearing. I cannot convince people one way or another in a letter. But after much study and a proven track record from last year, we believe the best option for continuing in-person education — a priority educators strongly support — is to follow the guidance of the CDC and the order issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Health.

Although many have expressed gratitude for our decision and have supported their local administrators, I am disappointed in the level of vitriol being used by some who do not support it. Every family in our schools is important to us, so I am sorry people are threatening to walk away from the opportunities and value of a Catholic education over the approach we are taking to ensure health and safety.

Generations of families, teachers and administrators have made Catholic education possible in the Diocese of Erie. That legacy continues today because of the hard work and commitment of administrators, faculty and staff as well as the sacrifice of parents. Their efforts during the pandemic have been that much more impressive. Even though it could put that legacy at risk for some of our schools, we cannot let enrollment issues drive the decision to follow the mask mandate. Please remember this is a temporary situation and that our recommendations provide enough leeway for schools to make decisions once the government mandates are lifted.



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Until that time, our position on following government mandates is not up for debate. It is essential that we now allow Catholic schools to focus on their priorities including academics and helping students develop into young men and women prepared to contribute to society with a solid, faith-filled foundation.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+Lawrence T. Persico

The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, JCL
Bishop of Erie

P.S. On the question of exemptions: It is not possible to use a religious exemption regarding masks, as they are not against the teachings of the Catholic faith. Students with documented medical conditions from a licensed medical professional will need to work directly with school administrators to explore what accommodations can and cannot be made in their school for this purpose.