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## Please do your part to keep our schools open

*A message from State Superintendent Jill Underly as the 2021-22 school year begins*

Our schools unite us. They are the bedrock of our communities and are where our children grow as individuals. They are a place where kids of all backgrounds are accepted. There is no doubt that our students learn best and our educators are most effective when they are both physically inside a school. That's why it's imperative our schools stay open to in-person instruction. But to keep our schools open, we must do our part to keep them safe and healthy.

The asks are simple, and the rewards are great. Wear a mask when inside buildings. Get vaccinated if you're able to. Maintain safe distancing where possible. If we agree to collectively use these mitigation strategies, our school buildings remain open. Kids learn to read, do math, interact with their friends, play sports, and become well-rounded youth.

A year ago, we were facing a great deal of uncertainty about the impacts of COVID-19. Our schools and their staff rose to the occasion in that moment, serving as first responders who went above and beyond to make sure students were fed, kept learning, and had equal access to things like technology. This year, we are far more confident in the ways we can work together to defeat the virus.

That's why it pains me to see and read about the divisiveness and hostility that planning for a safe return to school for the 2021-22 school year has caused. As a former school district leader, I know firsthand that reaching universal consensus on any issue, in any community, is challenging. As our nation and state experiences another surge in this COVID pandemic, we need to give school staff and school board members some grace as they make these important decisions. But let me remind you of this: They are doing what is best for our children and are working hard to keep them safe and avoid disruptions in learning.

This pandemic has greatly affected many parts of our daily lives, but especially our education system — and we aren't out of the woods yet. Children 12 and under, who amount to almost half a million of the students in Wisconsin schools, are still unable to get vaccinated. The number of children hospitalized for COVID-19 across our country have hit record highs in recent weeks. Data is proving that children are more vulnerable to infection from the Delta variant than past strains of COVID-19.

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As a parent, I understand the concern and hesitation many families may have about sending their children to school in this climate. I hear you. That is why I continue to implore our schools to take every measure possible to ensure all students remain safe, and that we have a successful, uninterrupted school year. Across the nation, we've watched schools open with limited mitigation measures in place be forced to close just weeks - or even days - into the new school year. We all want our schools open. We must collectively do our part to make sure that is possible. And it's on us to do everything in our power to serve the children, families, and educators of Wisconsin. Our schools are the glue of our communities and our economy. They connect us, but most of all, they serve as the bond advancing our successful future.

Finally, to Wisconsin's educators: Please know we have your back. We understand the immense amount of pressure you are under. I've seen firsthand how tirelessly you worked to reinvent your practice throughout this pandemic, and watched you go great lengths to focus on your students and their well-being. Please continue to innovate and serve as positive role models for your students. Do your best to ignore the noise and take a few moments to realize the importance of the impact you make on our kids. You are helping us grow our next generation of teachers, scientists, doctors, and leaders. The work you put in today has an immeasurable impact on our future.

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