



THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF MEMPHIS

5825 SHELBY OAKS DRIVE
P.O. BOX 341669
MEMPHIS, TN 38184-1669
(901) 373-1200

November 12, 2021

Dear Catholic School Families,

The Tennessee General Assembly recently enacted legislation that affects the Shelby County Health Department's directive for children to wear face masks while in school in Shelby County. The legislative changes require public schools throughout the State to be mask-optional (at current levels of Covid transmission). They also provide private schools the freedom to enact policies concerning the wearing of face masks that each private school deems appropriate for its students and faculty. This new legislation also removes the authority of the local health departments to issue further health directives during the Covid pandemic and vests the authority exclusively with the Governor to direct health policy on a statewide basis. Thus, Catholic schools in Shelby County are no longer required to mandate that children and faculty wear masks while in school.

Our Catholic School leadership believes it is now appropriate to transition to a mask-optional policy for our students and faculty. Over the past three school years of dealing with the pandemic we have been cautious and enacted policies to protect our children and staff. We even required masking of our students and faculty during time periods when we were not legally obligated to do so. But now Covid transmission rates within Shelby County and throughout West Tennessee are low, and we have experienced very few Covid cases in our schools. Our Catholic schools in Jackson Tennessee have been mask-optional since the beginning of the school year and there is not a single reported instance of transmission of Covid in the Jackson schools. Most public venues and sporting events are now mask optional for adults and children. Furthermore, with parents now having the option to vaccinate their school-age children against Covid (if they so choose) the rationale for continued masking has waned. And our educators and parents are increasingly concerned about the burdens that continued masking places upon the learning environment.

Thus, we have decided that all diocesan Catholic Schools in West Tennessee will have a mask-optional policy for all students and faculty, starting Monday, November 15. Children and faculty will be welcome to continue wearing masks if they so choose, but they will not be required to do so. Of course, we will continue to monitor Covid infection rates and other data going forward, and we will be in communication with state and local health officials. If there is a change in circumstances, our masking policy will be re-evaluated at that time.

God's blessings,

Very Rev. J. Keith Stewart
Vicar General
Diocese of Memphis

Rev. J. Keith Stewart

Mr. Pierre Nic Antoine
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Diocese of Memphis

Mr. Pierre N. Antoine

cc: Most Reverend Bishop David P. Talley, M.S.W., J.C.D.
Pastors
Dr. Colleen Butterick, Director of School Counseling Services
Sandra Goldstein, Director, Office of Human Resources
Rick Ouellette, Director, Office of Communications
Margaret Scott, Executive Assistant to Bishop David P. Talley