

## **MCS Family Update - August 27, 2021**

Dear MCS Families,

In recent days I've had the opportunity to talk with families who have concerns about our mask mandate and quarantine protocols. In my mind, each conversation has been an opportunity for me to transparently explain the rationale and data behind our decision; equally as important, each conversation has also helped me to learn more about how some families feel recent decisions may have eroded confidence and trust with MCS and me.

I recognize, given all the polarization, we will never all agree on how best to approach student learning and school safety during a pandemic. I also recognize, however, that we must continually reflect and improve our current protocols. To that end, this email highlights (in a question/answer format) recent themes that have emerged, my response to such questions, and our changes going forward.

### **Temporary Mask Mandate**

Question: What specific data contributed to the decision to require masks?

Answer: As noted in my email on August 19, during the first nine days of school, we identified 1 epi-linked case of potential school-based transmission (see below for further explanation of "epi-linked"). In the following three school days (August 16-18), we recorded 16 epi-linked cases for students and staff. The data indicated we were seeing increasing cases of potential school-based transmission. This data point, in addition to the increase in the total number of positive cases in MCS (refer to [MCS website for specific data by week and school](#)), as well as the significant increase in the 14-day case rate and positivity rate in Cobb County (refer to [Georgia Department of Public Health website](#) for specific data), guided our decision.

Question: Regarding the temporary mask mandate, how long is "temporary"?

Answer: Our goal is to remove the mask mandate as soon as it is safe to do such. We are soliciting daily feedback from health experts and monitoring four specific data points: 1) 14-day positive case rate in Cobb County; 2) positivity rate in Cobb County; 3) number of positive cases in MCS; and 4) number of epi-linked cases in MCS (potential school-based transmission). I trust many will understand that our priority is to return to the greatest sense of normalcy in our classrooms (whereby masks are optional) without doing such so early that we create a spike in MCS cases and possible school-based transmission.

### **School-based Transmission**

Question: How do we identify epi-linked cases and possible school-based transmission?

Answer: Our contact tracers have been trained by health experts to ask questions of families and students who have been identified as a close contact of a positive COVID case. Our first priority is to identify if we see potential clusters of positive cases in schools, thereby indicating possible school-based transmission. For example, students who test positive who sat at the same table or played on the same athletic team or multiple positive cases within a classroom could suggest a cluster of school-based transmission. Second, we attempt to discern when a child has been engaged in frequent non-school activities in close proximity and inside with other people who may have tested positive (play dates, carpool, student worksites). If we can reasonably discern the positive case was linked to school, we consider the case “epi-linked”; however, if non-school factors make such links questionable, we will not “epi-link” the case. It has been suggested in some conversations that we are intentionally increasing the number of epi-linked cases to justify a mask mandate. We are not. Our team has approached this work with the greatest degree of discernment and integrity and has made every attempt not to over-identify epi-linked cases. Put simply, every epi-linked case creates more concern for families about the safety of our classrooms – we gain nothing from over-identification.

### **Confirmation of Positive Cases**

Question: How does MCS confirm a student or staff positive COVID case?

Answer: In most situations, we will receive an email with attached medical documentation showing a positive case. In some situations, due to the need to quickly initiate contact tracing (and not be delayed while we wait on a family to provide the paperwork), we have accepted an email from a parent/legal guardian without medical documentation. While I have every confidence that a family would not falsify a positive COVID case for their child (as I believe no one wants their child to miss 10 days of school), it has been suggested that some in our community may falsify a COVID positive student to increase the number of overall positive cases, thereby giving support to a mask mandate. While I have more confidence in humanity than to believe something this egregious might occur, I also recognize this is a gap in our current process. Effective immediately, medical documentation will be required for each positive case. If a family refuses to provide such, we have the authority to engage Cobb & Douglas Public Health to confirm positive cases for individuals who have tested in Georgia before initiating in-school contact tracing.

Question: Does MCS accept at-home COVID tests for positive and negative results?

Answer: In recent weeks, as families have been unable to get COVID tested through a legitimate lab or healthcare provider in a timely manner, some have turned to purchasing at-home COVID test kits. We have been advised by health experts to proceed with caution, as such tests can be unreliable. For this reason, MCS quickly developed a partnership with a local doctor and we now provide free, PCR COVID tests for all MCS students, staff, and families (refer to [website for more information](#)) at our Lemon Street campus (Monday-Friday, 8am-12pm; results within 2-3 business days).

The at-home COVID tests have placed us in an awkward position – for those who demand more accountability (as noted in the above question), these at-home tests are problematic as we can't confirm who was tested, the quality of the manufacturer who made the test, or the integrity of how the nose was swabbed; however, I also don't want to disregard the efforts of someone who purchased an at-home test when lab-based tests were difficult to schedule. Going forward, we encourage all families to use our Lemon Street test site or secure a lab-based PCR or rapid antigen test.

### **COVID Testing**

Question: What is the status of the Department of Public Health (DPH) school-based testing partnership?

Answer: We are working closely with DPH and Mako Medical (the testing provider) to finalize the schedule and process for the school-based, voluntary testing for students and staff. In the coming weeks, families will receive more information including a consent form required for students to participate. As we wait for DPH and Mako to confirm that we are ready to begin testing in schools, if your child is in need of a COVID test, please visit our Lemon Street site. This week, approximately 800 tests have been done at Lemon Street through our partnership with DC Pulmonary Medicine; we continue to work with them to improve the process and support our MCS community.

### **Close Contact and Quarantine Protocol**

Question: How has MCS modified the close contact and quarantine protocols given the temporary mask mandate?

Answer: While some in the community may disagree with the temporary mask mandate, it is important to understand that the mask mandate will allow more students to avoid quarantine and remain in our classrooms. Prior to Monday, our close contact protocol (as defined by Georgia Department of Public Health) recommended any student within six feet for 15 minutes be quarantined for 7 or 10 days. However, by wearing masks, we are able to safely shorten that close contact distance. Our new protocol allows for more discretion and, subsequently, we have significantly less students identified as close contacts. For example, during the week prior to the mask mandate, 983 students were identified as close contacts from 51 positive cases; this week, that number decreased to 308 students from 58 positive cases.

Question: If my child already tested positive, will they still need to quarantine if they are a close contact?

Answer: We follow the Department of Public Health guideline that a person who has clinically recovered from COVID-19 and then is identified as a close contact of a new case within 3 months of symptom onset or first positive test does not need to be quarantined. If your child has tested positive and is identified as a close contact within

the following 90 days, you may provide medical documentation of a lab test showing the positive result to exempt your child from the close contact quarantine period.

### **Public Policy and Health Experts**

Question: Who is advising MCS on COVID-related data and protocols?

Answer: I don't pretend (or even want) to be a health policy or medical expert. I humbly engage experts in the field who, based on recommendations by the Georgia Department of Education, serve as advisors to these complex and often contentious decisions. Currently, MCS leadership regularly engages with experts from Cobb & Douglas Public Health, the Georgia Department of Public Health, WellStar, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and most recently, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. Please know that we labor over every decision, recognizing how it impacts student learning, school safety, and the lives of countless numbers of families. I say once again, we are in this together and seeking the best outcomes.

### **Communication and Transparency**

This past week, I hosted a live one-hour family town hall that was recorded and posted to [our website](#). During this time, I walked through our data and subsequent protocols; I also answered 50+ questions from constituents. Going forward, I will continue to provide emails and virtual town halls with updated data, protocols, and projections. To that end, I invite you to join me for our next family town hall in September; details can be [found here](#). Our approach to communication is driven by the transparency of values and data – you deserve to know how decisions are being made that impact your child.

In closing, thank you. I remain hopeful.

**If you have any questions, or need to report a positive COVID case, please email [COVID19results@marietta-city.org](mailto:COVID19results@marietta-city.org) or call 678-695-7213.**

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