

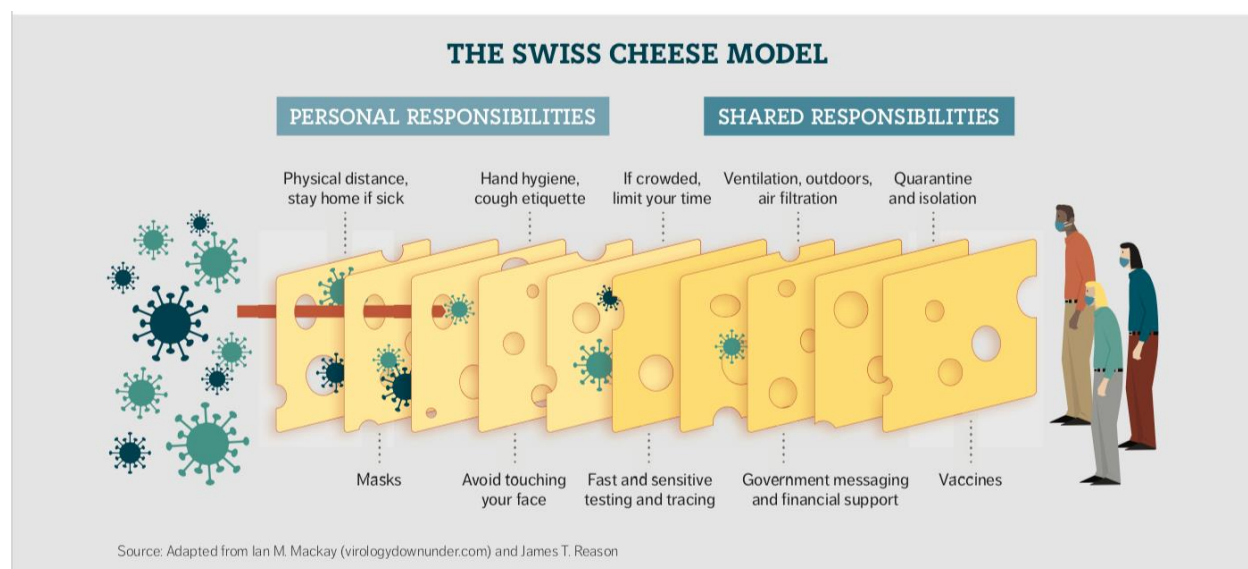
# MEMO

**To:** Superintendents in Suburban Milwaukee County School Districts  
**From:** Health Officers from Health Departments in Milwaukee County  
**Date:** February 10, 2022  
**RE:** Considerations for School Mitigation

Following the November and December 2021 surge in COVID-19 cases due to the Omicron variant, laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 case rates have been decreasing through the latter half of January into February 2022. While these decreases do not account for a significant increase in at-home rapid antigen tests, decreasing cases have been seen throughout Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, and in many US states. Despite these decreases, however, there are still critically high levels of community transmission.

A recent check of the [Milwaukee County COVID-19 Surveillance Dashboard](#) identifies an average of 312 positive cases per day; this average is consistent with mid-November 2021, a time period that preceded the Omicron surge but was indicative of high levels of community transmission. We hope that COVID-19 cases continue to decrease, but hope is not a strategy and we cannot predict what future variants will bring.

We know that COVID-19 mitigation strategies work when applied consistently. Further, we know that each individual strategy is not 100% effective; rather, these strategies work best when layered together. As the [Swiss Cheese Model](#) below demonstrates, COVID-19 mitigation is a combination of personal responsibilities and shared responsibilities. We cannot beat a pandemic based on personal responsibilities alone.



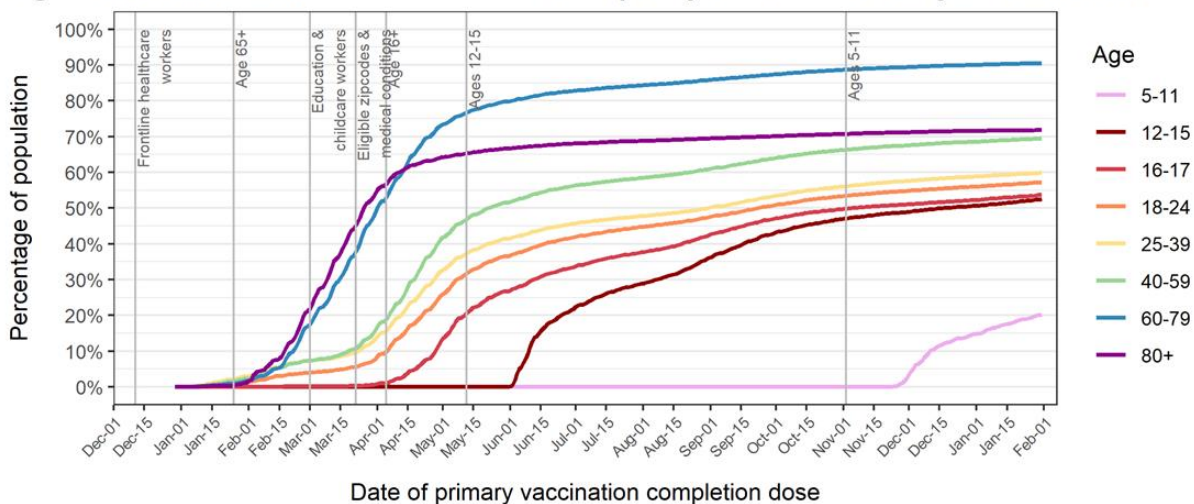
Keeping kids in school has been the focus of public health system at all levels since August 2021. Yet, keeping kids in schools is not without risk, which underscores the need for continued mitigation strategies outlined above.

We remain firm that "gating metrics" are not entirely the solution at the moment, but believe that community transmission levels should be a significant consideration. All municipalities in Milwaukee County remain at Critically High burden levels at the moment but are trending downward to Very High.

In several recent [interviews](#), CDC Director Rochelle Walensky has stated that "now is not the moment" to drop school mask precautions. Similarly, a group of national experts recently released a [potential set of considerations](#), with consideration for mask removal at lower levels of community transmission.

The primary mitigation efforts in most schools includes isolation/quarantine and masking, though we know there are additional efforts related to physical distancing and other factors as well. Vaccination is another key mitigation strategy, and vaccines are readily available throughout the community. Unfortunately, and despite wide availability, our vaccination rates for 5-11 year olds are considerably lower than other population groups; see figure below from February 3 countywide vaccination report. And, for districts and schools with K3 and K4 programs, those students are not eligible for vaccination yet but may be within the month.

**Figure 4: Percent of Milwaukee Co. residents completely vaccinated with any COVID-19 vaccine**



Data source: Wisconsin Immunization Registry (WIR)  
Created by the Milwaukee County COVID-19 Epidemiology Intel Team

Therefore, as questions have arisen lately about the removal of masks in schools, we need to carefully consider the impact these decisions have. Children may often have more mild cases of COVID-19 disease; however, data over the past month confirms record numbers of children under 18 years hospitalized with significant complications. Additionally, we cannot fail to recognize the role of children in community transmission through exposure to family, elderly grandparents, sports teams, etc. If our current daily case rates are similar to mid-November, is the need for masks in school settings now not the same as it was then? Lastly, if we consider an on-off masking strategy based on community case rates, invariably we'll not be able to re-implement in advance of the next surge.

We do not believe that now is the time to remove masks in schools due to critically high community levels of COVID-19 throughout Milwaukee County. Our current recommendations would be to keep all current school mitigation guidance in place in your respective schools. Maintaining current school mitigation efforts provides additional time for disease rates to continue to improve, time for community transmission to decrease, time for vaccination rates to increase among school-age children, and time to assess the BA.2 variant. Additionally, there are concerns with potential increasing transmission given a high potential for spring break travel in mid- and late-March. Masking, isolation and quarantine will continue to decrease the spread of COVID-19 and keep children in school to the extent possible as we continue to progress through this pandemic.