



ST. AGNES  
ACADEMY  
for GIRLS

ST. DOMINIC  
SCHOOL  
for BOYS

# *The Dominican*

COMMUNITY *of* SCHOOLS

August 3, 2021

I know this message is lengthy, but I ask that you please thoughtfully read it in its entirety. The national, state, and local pandemic response is an emotional issue. Our decision-making is focused on keeping our community safe and keeping as many students in school as many days as possible.

All last year, I gave thanks for the will and perseverance of our community. I could not have imagined in July 2020 that we would successfully navigate a full school year. The only thing that slowed us down was a once-in-a-lifetime snowstorm. Go figure :).

As the school year ended, I was optimistic that the worst of the virus pandemic was behind us. In fact, I announced in May that we anticipated opening this school year with a 'mask-optional' policy. However, while we enjoyed reconnecting with family and friends and feeling like life is returning to 'normal' during the first half of the summer, the rise of the Delta variant in Memphis in July has dampened my optimism.

As I have done throughout this pandemic, I continue to consult with local health professionals, industry groups such as the Southern Association of Independent Schools and the Memphis Association of Independent Schools as well as local public schools, and we have monitored guidance and communicated with Shelby County Health Department (SCHD) and the CDC.

The following information has been on my mind as I have considered school opening:

- St. Agnes Academy - St. Dominic School had one case of on-campus transmission in 170 days of school last year. We believe we had two cases of transmission during summer camp.
- Our students consistently followed our screening, reporting, and quarantine policies last year.
- While we have a high rate of vaccination among our staff (>80%), almost half our student body remains ineligible for the vaccine, at least in the short term.
- The Delta variant is spreading rapidly and is now the most common SARS-CoV-2 variant circulating in the country. The 7-day average of new cases in Shelby County jumped from 42.4 on 6/29 to 339 on 7/29. Shelby County's community transmission level is currently ranked as "high" by the CDC.
- It appears that the Delta variant may be transmissible by vaccinated people. It is also not yet clear whether vaccinated people or children become seriously ill from this new variant.
- There is a frustrating lack of meaningful data or government guidance.

- SCHD and CDC protocols for quarantining exposed individuals have not changed since school ended. Any individual who is deemed a close contact must quarantine for 7-10 days if no symptoms.
- SCHD announced this week that they expect the Delta variant to peak in Shelby County in mid-August.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics last week issued a recommendation that everyone older than age 2 wear a mask.
- The CDC issued new mask guidance: in areas of substantial or high transmission (like Shelby County), everyone should wear a mask in public indoor settings to prevent the spread of the Delta variant; and all teachers, staff, students, and visitors to K-12 schools should wear a mask indoors, regardless of vaccination status.

Considering this information, I have made the decision to begin the school year with a continued layered approach to COVID mitigation. These measures will be evaluated at the end of August. As we start the school year we will continue to implement the following strategies:

- Masks or other cloth face coverings will be required for all students, faculty, and visitors while indoors on the SAA-SDS campus.
- Frequent mask breaks will be provided as needed. Students will be able to request mask breaks.
- Hand sanitizing dispensers will remain readily accessible throughout the campus, with hand-washing encouraged throughout the day.
- Snack and lunch will take place outside when possible.
- We will expect all community members to stay home when sick, get tested when recommended, and comply with contact tracing, quarantine, and isolation protocols.

As we start the school year we will modify the following strategies:

- Health screenings at drop-off will not take place.
- Parents and other visitors are welcome on campus as long as they follow our guidelines.

I acknowledge that not all schools are requiring these safety protocols. Because schools are implementing different safety protocols, we will have a great opportunity to collect data. We will closely monitor not only our community, but the virus cases in public and private schools around us. I participate in weekly meetings with other independent schools and with the Shelby County Health Department. During the first three weeks of school, we will review the case numbers in the community and collect data on transmission in schools. If the data supports it, we will revisit our mitigation protocols including moving to a mask-optional policy for students.

I understand that our community is divided on the danger the virus poses. The virus affects each family differently, and therefore each family has its own story. Our plan is intended to provide us with a few weeks of local data to ensure our collective safety. I also recognize the social and emotional impacts of continued masking on our students and faculty. My sincere hope is that we can transition to 'mask optional' as soon as is practical.

The strongest communities are not those where everyone agrees on everything, but those where everyone works together to make the community vibrant while accepting the views of others. You chose St. Agnes Academy - St. Dominic school because of our diversity, our faith, our community, and our quality

education. This has not changed. Last year you supported us as we did what was needed. We can do this again.

I made this decision after much deliberation and prayer. I have prayed to God for an easy and obvious course of action. Next, I prayed for wisdom and the strength to make the right decision. I will continue to pray for His love and support of our entire community. Every decision we make will remain focused on providing the best educational experience for our students in the safest environment possible.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Hood', written in a cursive style.

Tom Hood  
President, St. Agnes Academy-St. Dominic School

*"Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, just as in fact you are doing."*

*1Thessalonians 5:11*

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