

September 21, 2021

Joint Statement from SC AAP, SCASN, SC PTA, The SCEA, and PSTA

Most school districts in South Carolina are nearing the one-month mark of the school year, and unfortunately, the continued deterioration of public health conditions is directly leading to increased educational disruption and student illness across our state.

Last week, the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), announced that more than 21,000 students have contracted COVID-19 this school year, and, at minimum, another 86,000 students have missed in-person learning opportunities due to close contact quarantine protocols.

In addition, according to the South Carolina Children's Hospital Collaborative, as of yesterday 32 children in our state are hospitalized with COVID-19, and 10 children are in intensive care, including 5 children on ventilators and 3 more children on ECMO. And, most tragically, three South Carolina students have already been lost to the virus this school year.

These devastating outcomes stand in stark contrast to the extremely limited impact of COVID-19 on in-person learning during the 2020-2021 school year.

Last year, local school districts were able to respond to local health conditions by taking actions aligned to district resources and capacities. As a result, the instances of COVID-19 in schools were extremely limited with far fewer students experiencing learning disruptions due to quarantine. Those results were achieved by local school districts implementing the mitigation strategies recommended by our public health authorities, including universal use of face masks.

This year, however, the capacity of districts to ensure student safety has been severely impaired by state-level policy decisions that were made at a time where public health conditions were substantially different—and better—than they are today.

As a result, our associations jointly call on Speaker of the House Jay Lucas and President of the Senate Harvey Peeler to call the General Assembly back to Columbia for a special session to return decision making authority over face mask requirements to local school districts.

In a moment of public health crisis, our districts should be empowered to utilize the full-range of mitigation strategies recommended by DHEC and our local health care providers. This is especially important until such time as children ages 5-11 become eligible for the vaccine that numerous state leaders have identified as the key to moving our state out of the pandemic.

There is no higher calling for our state government than the protection of the learning and health of our children, which makes the need for legislative action and leadership urgent and immediate.

Every day that our legislature fails to act is another day where our children are being exposed to needless health risks and learning disruptions.