

Dear HA Family:

As I'm sure you are aware, Houston Academy made it through the last school year with no closures and with no major outbreaks of COVID-19. In part, this is because of the incredible job that our students did [wearing their masks](#), social distancing, washing their hands, and acting with caution when not at school. Additionally, and perhaps, most importantly, we were able to weather the last school year because we made all of our decisions in consultation with our local hospitals, pediatricians, the Alabama Department of Public Health, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the United States Centers for Disease Control. None of us at H.A. are medical experts, and we felt it was most prudent to follow the advice of experts and people who have spent their entire adult lives doing medical research and studying medicine.

Currently, all of the above organizations and individuals are recommending to us that we start the school year wearing masks while indoors. Like last year, we intend to follow their recommendations. Therefore, we are going to require that all students, faculty, and staff ages 3 and up, wear masks, indoors at Houston Academy.

Because of the short notice and our inability to procure our official H.A. masks, we are going to allow students to bring their own masks to school. We are requiring that masks should avoid any decoration that is distracting or outside the boundaries of our dress code. For example, depictions of sex, drugs, alcohol, or messages of a political nature will not be allowed. We reserve the right to determine if the masks are within acceptable guidelines of our dress code. Additionally, we are going to provide disposable, surgical masks at the front desk for anyone who needs them.

Truly, no one is more tired of these restrictions than we. In fact, until the [masking](#) recommendations came out last week, we fully intended to begin the school year with masks being optional. However, the Delta variant has been a proverbial game changer. Research indicates that the Delta [variant is 40-60% more transmissible](#) than the Alpha variant and viral loads of those infected by the Delta variant appear to be approximately [1,000 times higher](#). Locally, only [28% of the eligible population of Houston County are fully immunized](#). That is one of the lowest rates in the entire nation. Likewise, Houston County is currently at the [highest risk level](#) for Covid-19 transmission. Some of our local

medical professionals have reported to me that they fear that we will be at January levels of COVID-19 transmission within the next few weeks. Of note, both nationally and locally, [between 97% and 99% of people hospitalized for COVID are unvaccinated](#), while the [mRNA vaccines](#) remain as much as [90% effective](#) against the Delta variant. However, we need to keep in mind that neither vaccination nor having antibodies from a previous COVID-19 infection is a guarantee against transmission or infection. I [read one doctor](#) and researcher who compared it to applying sunscreen:

Sunscreen provides some protection against sunburn, but a cautious person might also wear a wide-brimmed hat or avoid sitting out during the height of the day. For COVID, face masks and social distancing, particularly at indoor public places, could be similarly useful in situations where there is higher risk.

Clearly, in Houston County and the state of Alabama, at this moment, we are at “higher risk.” The University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Public Health has created a [model that suggests](#) that cases of COVID-19 could climb to 2-3 times higher than the peak we reached last January. Remember, too, that masking, primarily, protects others. Even if you are not concerned about COVID-19 potential harm to your own child, it is still important to help protect the rest of our children and faculty. We have already had a large number of people in our immediate community negatively impacted COVID-19. Frankly, if one preventable death occurs in our H.A. family because we did not follow the guidelines of our medical professionals, that is one too many.

I hope that even if you disagree with our policies, you will appreciate our position and work with your children to comply. With any luck, vaccination rates will rise, and we will be able to throw out our masks, once and for all.

Dr. Scott D. Phillipps
Headmaster