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Catholic Schools Office releases COVID-19 recommendations as schools prepare to open

The Catholic Schools Office (CSO) of the Diocese of Erie has released recommendations for the 30 Catholic schools that will open their doors in northwest Pennsylvania beginning in late August.

“We have two top priorities as we return to the classroom,” said Jim Gallagher, superintendent of schools. “We want to maintain the in-person instruction for students that has been so important in our approach, and we want to keep students and staff as safe as possible. We have been very successful with the mitigation of COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic, and our plans are designed to keep us on that path.”

To that end, the CSO is basing its recommendations — not mandates — on the guidance of the CDC, the Pennsylvania Department of Health and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The CDC recommendations and available transmission rate data have been studied at length and were used by the CSO to create its protocols. Among key features schools are being asked to consider are:

- more -

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- Screening before entry into schools
- Masking when a county is in the substantial or high categories of community spread
- Distancing students and desks at a minimum of three feet
- Washing and sanitizing hands throughout the school day
- Disinfecting high-touch surfaces frequently
- Increasing ventilation
- Staying home when not feeling well
- Self-reporting for contact tracing
- Isolating or quarantining when appropriate.

“We are confident in the decisions we have made,” Gallagher said. “Our personnel and parents will have to pay attention to many details. Given our ongoing evaluation of safety mitigation strategies, as well as our successful track record, we will continue relying on the guidance of the CDC and the Pennsylvania departments of Health and Education.”

Following last year’s approach, the CSO is encouraging parish-based schools and school systems to *strongly consider* recommendations from official government agencies. All schools will be *required* to follow mandates that may be issued from government agencies, including masking. The Catholic Schools Office does not plan to issue any of its own mandates.

“We have 30 schools located within a 10,000-square-mile region,” Gallagher said. “Our students come from about 90 different school districts. It would not be fair to tie the hands of our administrators and boards. We are collaborating with and supporting our schools, but we have to allow for local autonomy.”

In addition to its recommendations, the CSO also outlined a decision-making process so that school systems and parish-based schools can adjust their strategies when new developments regarding COVID-19 emerge. This includes approval from the board of directors and parish pastors as appropriate.

Gallagher knows the beginning of the school year will include challenges as everyone settles into another academic year impacted by the pandemic.

“We had hoped we would not find ourselves in this situation,” he said, “but here we are. We will be as thoughtful and deliberate as possible when updating our procedures.”

He also reflected on the coming weeks and months.

“I am confident our administrators and teachers will meet the moment,” Gallagher said, “and that our students will do their best to follow the protocols, grateful to continue their education in person. Ultimately, we need to stay focused on our primary mission: student learning in a Catholic, Christ-centered environment.”

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