



March 10, 2021

Dear Colleagues:

This week marks one year since our schools closed for what we thought was a two-week hiatus to rid ourselves of COVID-19. Perhaps it was better that at that time we had no idea of all that would lie ahead of us in the upcoming year. However, through the grace of God, the unbelievable work of so many people, and the cooperation of the majority of us, we have arrived at this point. In a special way we continue to hold in prayer those who are ill and the families who have lost loved ones from COVID-19.

As I have done each month, below you will find our current statistics since the start of this school year. Our weekly average has decreased since last month to between 8-15 cases for students and staff. Of course, we'd appreciate no cases for either group, but given our numbers, our schools appear to continue to address the situation successfully.

As of March 1, 2021, COVID-positive statistics for our 19 parish and diocesan schools since September 1 are as follows:

365 student cases out of 6064 students
75 staff cases out of 786 staff members

382 cases in the 14 schools in Delaware
58 cases in the five schools on Maryland's Eastern Shore

Our student enrollment has continued to grow since September 1 from 6026 students to 6064 students.

Vaccination of school personnel is well underway. Maryland administrators, faculty, and staff who desired vaccinations have been vaccinated; Delaware vaccinations continue to occur at a steady rate. Educators in Delaware who wish to be vaccinated are on lists to be scheduled. Some questions have been posed to me that may be ones you have.

1. Does the Diocese of Wilmington require school personnel (administrators, teachers, staff, coaches) to be vaccinated?

Vaccinations are strongly encouraged but not mandated by the Diocese of Wilmington. School personnel have the opportunity to be vaccinated but there is no mandate. This vaccination, like other vaccinations (i.e. influenza) remain a personal health decision.

2. When the majority of school personnel are vaccinated, may all students return to school?

Student return to school is contingent upon meeting health department guidelines for social distancing (3-6 feet). At the current time, in classrooms students who are masked facing one direction must be seated a minimum of three feet apart; at lunch when students are not masked, they must be seated a minimum of six feet apart. Return to school for students is not dependent upon vaccinations but rather it is a function of classroom and cafeteria space.

3. Will the current arrangements for hybrid schools change before June?

The decision to return more students to in-person learning is made locally but requires diocesan review. In places where changes can be made, school administrators may make a change. In schools where space limits changes, the current arrangements may need to continue.

4. Will the week after the Easter break be designated for virtual instruction as was done at Christmas?

No. School will resume on Monday, April 12, in the regular format that has been in place. Families travelling during the Easter break should self-quarantine, if necessary.

5. What is the plan for September 2021?

Like you, our Catholic Schools Office staff, school administrators, and parents/guardians look forward to a full return to school by all students. However, we shall follow the guidelines of the respective health departments in the states where our Catholic schools are located.

6. How soon will we know the September plans for schools?

School administrators will plan for students' return to school from now throughout the summer. As guidelines come from the health departments, plans will be adjusted. We encourage regular communication between schools and families now and throughout the summer to keep families abreast of the current situation.

Currently, 12 schools (11 elementary schools and 1 high school) are fully in person for students. Three of four parish and diocesan high schools are in a hybrid format for instruction. Four parish and diocesan elementary schools are in a hybrid format for instruction for some grades while other grades are fully in person.

In all schools the importance of adhering to COVID-compliant behaviors cannot be emphasized enough, even with declining COVID positivity rates and vaccinations underway. Mask-wearing, social distancing, hand sanitizing, and daily wellness checks remain the best ways to mitigate the spread of COVID. Now is not the time to relax any of these strategies.

This letter will be the final monthly communication we shall send, unless or until there may be significant news to share diocesan-wide. Regular communications will continue, as they have been, from your local school.

Before concluding, it is imperative that we thank parents for their ongoing support and cooperation throughout the past year. Their commitment to quality Catholic education for their child(ren) is commendable and very much appreciated. Forming today's youth in faith and morals portends a strong future for our Church and our nation.

A tremendous debt of gratitude is owed to you, our school administrators, faculty, and staff. There was no hesitation on your part to create workable plans for schools, to adjust the plans as health department guidelines changed, and to execute the plans with accountability and integrity. It may sound trite in referring to you as heroes, but truly you are. You were present in person from the first day of school and remained constant, even when COVID surges occurred. In addition, you planned and taught in two different platforms – in-person and virtual. You assumed additional responsibilities beyond your regular assignments to make schools work, often relinquishing prep periods and substituting when substitutes could not be found. We hold you in the highest regard and we are proud to work with you in our Catholic schools. Our diocesan theme this year is “Called to Serve.” You have witnessed this theme by your lives.

We are also extremely grateful to our parish pastors whose presence and leadership have enabled our Catholic schools to conduct business as usual in the most unusual of times. COVID-19 created many additional expenses for schools in terms of additional personnel as well as supplies. These expenses were often non-budgeted items causing finances to be stretched, but our pastors ensured that they were secured for the well-being of our students and staff.

Despite the challenges we have faced (or as a result of them), we have received many blessings throughout the past year. We have had the opportunity to re-examine everything we had done and creatively discovered new and better ways to accomplish our goals. Professional development of teachers increased exponentially as you learned to teach effectively both in-person and virtually. Schools realized what was essential to learning in the school environment and simplified classroom and building spaces. Students grew responsibly in protecting their health and developed a communal conscience in protecting the health of one another. A variety of communication strategies kept the home and school connected. Perhaps our greatest blessing was our increased reliance on prayer and our relationship with the Lord. As we go forward, let us resolve to take with us these blessings and to integrate them into our future plans.

In this Year of Saint Joseph, as proclaimed by Pope Francis, may we turn to this loving, accepting, obedient, hard-working Patron of the Universal Church for his protection and guidance and to our Blessed Mother for her intercession with her Son on our behalf.

Sincerely,

Louis P. De Angelo

Louis P. De Angelo, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools