

# Arkansas Chapter

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Arkansas Pediatricians Urge School Mask Policies, Vaccinations Amid Alarming Rise in COVID-19 Infections**

### **Layered Approach to COVID-19 Safety Keeps Kids in School**

LITTLE ROCK, AR – As COVID-19 cases surge to record numbers in the state, pediatrician members of the Arkansas Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (ARAAP) are reiterating their strong recommendation that schools and child care facilities implement school-wide mask policies for staff and students older than 2 years of age, in alignment with [guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics](#), to help keep children and staff in school. Pediatricians also recommend all eligible staff and children receive COVID-19 vaccines, which reduce infections, hospitalizations, and death from the virus. [Currently, children age 5 and above are eligible for COVID-19 vaccines](#), with some exceptions.

“We know schools have been doing a remarkable job at controlling the spread of COVID-19 while keeping kids in school where they belong. As students come back during the Omicron surge, we need to see the successful strategies that worked last year reinstated, as some schools relaxed these policies in the fall. Measures like school-wide mask requirements and encouraging vaccination will help keep kids in the classroom, where they can learn, play, and grow.” said Dr. Susan Averitt, MD, FAAP, President of the ARAAP.

Cases are rising quickly, with nearly 5,000 cases statewide on 12/30/21. Test positivity rates near 20% in Arkansas indicate high community spread. Nationally, hospital admissions due to COVID-19 are rising for children.<sup>i</sup> Currently, 12% of Arkansas children ages 5-11 and 51% of youth ages 12-17 have at least 1 COVID-19 vaccine, but too many remain unprotected.<sup>ii</sup> Given these concerns, school-wide mask policies and vaccinations will help keep children, educators, families, and communities safe as children return to school after the break.

School leaders have clear authority to implement school-wide mask policies after Act 1002 of 2021 was ruled unconstitutional this week by Circuit Judge Tim Fox. This law prohibited schools and public entities from implementing universal mask policies, but it was put on hold in August.

*The Arkansas Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics is incorporated in the state of Arkansas.*

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Even vaccinated students and staff should wear masks during the surge given the transmissibility of the Omicron variant. Data cited in the hearing for Act 1002 by Dr. José Romero, Arkansas Secretary of Health and ARAAP member, showed that schools where students and staff wore masks had 20% fewer cases of COVID-19 than schools with no mask requirements.<sup>iii</sup> Well-fitting masks and vaccinations are key components of a layered approach to safety that also includes efforts such as improved ventilation and social distancing.

ARAAP leaders appreciate Governor Hutchinson’s efforts to improve access to home COVID-19 tests so that families can make informed decisions about gathering indoors with others. Families can use home tests for COVID-19 when making decisions about sending children with mild upper respiratory symptoms to school. As always, families should call their child’s doctor with questions or concerns about symptoms or COVID-19 vaccinations.

## **About the Arkansas Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics**

The Arkansas Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics is the statewide membership organization for pediatricians and pediatric subspecialists. More than 450 members strong, its mission is to attain optimal physical, mental, and social health and well-being for all children in Arkansas through advocacy, service, and professional support of members.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/27/health/covid-kids-hospitals>

<sup>ii</sup> 12/8/21 AAP Analysis of data titled “COVID-19 Vaccinations in the United States, Jurisdiction,” CDC COVID-19 Data Tracker

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2021/dec/30/states-ban-on-government-mask-mandates/?news-arkansas>