



July 16, 2021

Dear Arkansas Parents, Teachers, School Staff, and Coaches:

We all want Arkansas students to be able to return safely to in-person classes and to engage in social and athletic activities this fall. To protect your college- and school-bound students, it is important to **start vaccinations this week to achieve full protection in the next few weeks.**

On July 9, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a statement that "children and adolescents benefit from in-person learning, and safely returning to in-person school in the fall of 2021 is a priority." However, despite our best intentions, the very low rate of vaccination against COVID-19 in Arkansas threatens our ability to return students safely to in-person learning and other activities. It is time for parents of students age 12 years and older, including college students, to take immediate action.

Because of our low vaccination rate and the presence of the highly contagious Delta variant, Arkansas had the highest rate of new infections among all states during the past week. The Delta variant is infecting younger patients than the original virus, and more than 3/4ths of new infections are among those younger than 55. About 12% of confirmed recent infections have been among children. We must offer protection to our college students and all school-aged children that we can.

We have the means to be successful. COVID-19 vaccines are free and available to everyone in Arkansas age 12 and older. More than 2.2 million doses of vaccine have been given in Arkansas and 335 million in the U.S. The vaccines have been 94% effective at preventing hospitalization due to COVID-19 infection. More than 99% of deaths from COVID-19 in the past several months are among unprotected individuals. Serious side effects from the vaccines are extremely rare. We are now eight months into vaccine delivery, and it is clear that benefits of the vaccine far outweigh the risks.

Unfortunately, only 35% of Arkansans are fully vaccinated and protected. Currently, only 16% of 12–18 year olds are fully vaccinated. Children under age 12 are not yet eligible for the vaccine. Although most infected children have milder symptoms than adults, some develop very serious, life-threatening illness. The long-term effects of even mild infection in children are not yet fully known.

To protect these young children, we must increase vaccination rates among adolescents, teens, and adults. Parents of those who cannot be protected (children under 12) should work with school leadership to support a plan for safe return to school. In addition, they should reintroduce and reinforce defensive strategies, including frequent handwashing, physical distancing, and masks when in public.

***Optimal protection does not occur until 5 weeks after the first dose of the Pfizer vaccines, 6 weeks after the first dose of Moderna vaccines and 4 weeks after the Johnson and Johnson vaccine.*** The Pfizer vaccine is currently the only vaccine authorized for children age 12-18. Therefore, it is essential to start now if we are to achieve a successful return to in-person school this fall. For those receiving the Moderna or Pfizer vaccines, full protection requires both shots. This is especially important for protection against the Delta variant.

You have only a few weeks to act. It is predictable that if we do not increase our vaccination rate among those eligible, we will almost certainly have disruptions to educational, social, and athletic activities this fall. If you are fully protected through vaccination and you have been around someone who has COVID-19, you do not need to stay away from others, quarantine, or get tested unless you have symptoms.

Now is time to protect your children and minimize the potential for disruption of your child's school year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph W. Thompson MD MPH". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Joseph W. Thompson, MD, MPH  
ACHI, President and CEO  
Professor, UAMS Colleges of Medicine and Public Health