News

Students work at their desks on the first day of the new school year at St. Matthew School in

Students work at their desks on the first day of the new school year at St. Matthew School in Franklin, Tenn., Aug. 6, 2020, with extensive COVID-19 protocols in place, including temperature screening and mandatory face masks for each student. In Louisiana, the attorney general opposes Catholic schools' mask mandate put in place as the new 2021-2022 school year begins. (CNS photo/Rick Musacchio, Tennessee Register)



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As indoor mask mandates are returning in areas of the country hard hit by a new wave of the coronavirus, U.S. bishops have been informing their dioceses of this new policy impacting Masses, Catholic schools and church events.

This is particularly true in Louisiana where bishops have been announcing this change in letters to their respective dioceses or public announcements the first week of August.

Their announcements followed the Aug. 2 statewide mask mandate issued by Gov. John Bel Edwards requiring anyone age 5 and up to wear a mask indoors in K-12 schools, businesses, universities and churches as the state tries to bring down the rising number of COVID-19 infections. The mandate is in effect until at least Sept.1.

Louisiana is currently experiencing the worst outbreak of new COVID-19 cases per capita in the nation, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It also is having record hospitalizations due to the impact of the Delta variant of the coronavirus particularly affecting the state's unvaccinated. Despite a recent surge in vaccinations, only 37.2% of its residents were fully vaccinated as of Aug. 4.

The state mask mandate also impacts Catholic schools that have already begun opening in some parts of the state.

Sarah McDonald, communications director for the New Orleans Archdiocese said Catholic schools, some of which opened Aug. 5, are requiring all people on campus age 5 and up to wear masks "per the statewide mask mandate."

In an Aug. 2 letter to Catholic school community in the Diocese of Baton Rouge, Bishop Michael G. Duca said that at the end of the last school year, many believed the new school year would be much different.

Calling the recent spikes in local COVID-19 cases "particularly alarming," he said he believes the best way to begin the new school year is to "return to school using similar practices with which we ended the last year that include physical distancing, proper quarantining and the mandatory wearing of masks" with no exceptions based on vaccination status.

"All students, faculty and administrators will follow the same guidelines," he wrote, noting that they are all familiar with them and that these "difficult decisions will enable us to safely begin our school year while observing these new realities we are facing as a community."

The bishop said his goal was to keep students in school with minimal disruption.

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"We begin this school year, tired and weary due to this pandemic, but our eyes are fixed on a future filled with hope knowing that our courageous actions now will again yield much success in days to come!" he said.

Lafayette Bishop J. Douglas Deshotel said Aug. 4 that students, faculty and visitors will be required to wear masks at all Catholic schools in the Diocese of Lafayette at the start of the upcoming school year.

The next day, the state's attorney general, Jeff Landry, emailed a letter to the bishop opposing this decision. He signed the letter as a parishioner and the attorney general and posted a copy of it on his Facebook account.

In the letter, he said he was writing out of "concern for the health and welfare" of his child and others regarding the diocesan decision to require masks in schools.

"It is illogical to expect a child to wear a mask all day in (the) precise manner recommended," he wrote, urging the bishop to "consider a parent's freedom to choose what is best for their children."

In an underlined section, he also said the church had been inconsistent during the pandemic by closing its churches and but then supporting Catholic Charities in "actively assisting illegal immigrants," whom he described as "COVID-19 infected."

Bishop Deshotel's statement, reported by Acadiana Advocate, daily newspaper of Baton Rouge, anticipated likely criticism.

He reminded parents that diocesan schools are private institutions and the diocese "has the right to establish policies relating to the safety of their students, faculty, staff and administrators."

He also said the diocese is "acutely aware of, and respectful of, the differences of opinion voiced by individuals and political leaders relating to the use of masks/face-coverings and corresponding government mandates."

"The impetus behind this policy is safety and health, and we are hopeful that all parents and students will comply regardless of their personal opinions and philosophies," he said.