

# A Welcome Return to the Classroom

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Most Merced County students return to the classroom this week after a year-and-a-half of in-person learning, distance learning, or a hybrid of both. While these measures were implemented with the best interest of our staff and students in mind, we know that the isolation from their peers was detrimental to many students' social-emotional well-being.

During this same timeframe, I worked alongside school district leaders and public health officials to develop guidance and protocols that always put the health and safety of our students, staff and school communities first.

As we have worked in Merced County during the pandemic to align our programs to state mandates, our school boards, superintendents and school staff spent countless hours planning, revising, and planning again on how to bring children back into the learning environment best suited to support their academic, social and emotional development. We are grateful for our community partners, parents and other caregivers that have worked right alongside us during the past 16 months.

While the news of the delta variant spreading across the country is troubling, mitigation strategies like getting vaccinated, using face coverings and increased ventilation work to keep people safe. Hospitals are reporting that children who are being admitted with COVID-19 symptoms are most often from homes where parents and older siblings are unvaccinated. This can be prevented if family members get the vaccine. It is really up to adults to make the right choices to keep our schools open and our students in the classroom where they are engaged and learning.

The news this week that all state education employees must either be vaccinated or test regularly is another critical step — one that aligns with the science and public health recommendations — to create the safest environment possible as students return to the classroom.

Public schools are where we serve all students and where our community comes together. I call on all of us to do our part in staying safe so our schools remain open this year; this means wearing a mask when in large groups, especially indoors, getting vaccinated and vaccinating all eligible students in your family.

Our goal all along has been to provide options for students and families while meeting mandates and frameworks set by the state. Simply put: Schools are governed in a way that only allows a certain level of flexibility, and though we have been creative and innovative, it is simply not possible to accommodate everyone, though we will continue to strive to do just that.

I know the next year may be challenging but I look forward to getting students back in the classroom where they have the greatest opportunity to learn and succeed. Merced County is Ready to Return — learn more at [www.mcoe.org/readytoreturn](http://www.mcoe.org/readytoreturn).