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Greetings Members of the Arkansas General Assembly,

I presently serve as Superintendent of the Marion School District in Eastern Arkansas. We provide educational services to approximately 4000 students daily. MSD is one of a very small number of districts in the delta that is growing in population; consequently, our classrooms are filled to capacity. Our district encompasses one of the larger geographic footprints in the state requiring some 40 buses filled to capacity, transporting 2500 students over 2500 miles twice daily. Over 70% of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch, and space restrictions force conditions in our cafeterias that are far from optimal. In short, it is physically impossible for us to provide appropriate social distancing for our buses, classrooms and/or cafeterias.

We have a school-based health clinic on our campus serving both students and staff that provides easy access to Covid-19 vaccinations. We have also held numerous community-based vaccine clinics- approximately 1 every 3 weeks- offering gift certificates, groceries, large screen TV's etc. While these efforts have produced laudable results with our faculty and staff, our success with our student population remains something akin to abysmal.

Last year we worked very hard to provide a virtual education option for our students. Unfortunately, a large percentage reside in single parent homes forcing a difficult balancing act for parents who are forced to choose between working and providing the learning support required for their students to succeed virtually. Additionally, an estimated 1 out of 3 of the homes in our district have no access to a reliable internet service, making consistent communication between our faculty and students problematic at best. In short, despite our best efforts very few of our students who chose to participate in the virtual option last year achieved an acceptable level of academic progress.

With our early start date of July 26, today is the second day of our second week of school. By the end of the day we will have over 500 students and staff quarantined. While we continue to diligently encourage vaccinations and voluntary masking, it is clear that we are, as many others will soon be, fighting a battle that we are not appropriately equipped to win, a battle that if lost could well lead mandated school closings and the subsequent economic upheaval we all witnessed during the previous wave of the pandemic.

In closing, when facing substantive decisions such as mandating masks in our schools, if the General Assembly is unwilling to establish a state-wide mandate, we feel strongly that our communities should be afforded the right to choose their own course. Consequently, we respectfully request that the Arkansas General Assembly take the appropriate action to afford school districts the opportunity to make the decisions that they feel best serve the needs of their students and their communities.

If circumstances beyond our control are forcing us to plow new rocky ground, at least let us pick our own mules.

Respectfully,

Dr. Glen Fenter
Superintendent

