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**Vermont Physician Groups Call on Vermonters to
Prioritize their Communities and Protect Schools for our Children**

MONTPELIER (November 18, 2020) – The American Academy of Pediatrics Vermont Chapter, Vermont Academy of Family Physicians and Vermont Medical Society join Governor Scott and the Vermont Department of Health in calling on Vermonters to refrain from any social gathering in order to protect and prioritize essential services like schools, child care, and health care as we see rates of community transmission of COVID-19 rise.

The new restriction on multi-household gatherings is based on epidemiology or systematic observations of how the virus is spreading in our communities. Since October 1, 71% of cases associated with an outbreak are linked to a private party or social gathering. Vermont is not seeing significant transmission in places where prevention policies are followed like schools and child care. That tells us that the prevention policies and mitigation strategies are working and effort should be placed on avoiding unnecessary gatherings so that essential services can remain open, including keeping kids in schools; adults in jobs; preventing infections; and minimizing deaths.

For families with children, this means cancelling playdates and other social gatherings. However, pods which have already been established for education or the care of children are allowable. This includes allowing carpooling for education/child care purposes and formal and informal child care. Safety measures like social distancing, handwashing and masking should be followed. The smaller the pod, the better. Activities should prioritize needs over wants.

Avoiding multi-household gatherings achieves two purposes:

1. It addresses the spaces and situations where we are seeing transmission of COVID-19 in Vermont
2. It limits activities that exacerbate inequities in favor of activities that address inequities like schools and childcare.

It's been more than two months since K-12 schools reopened and pediatricians would like to thank teachers, school nurses, administrators, and all school staff for their incredible work. Our patients tell us that their in-person days at school provide structure and routine and the opportunity to interact with their peers and teachers in meaningful ways. Many describe improvements in their mental health. Parents are relieved and grateful.

Keeping schools open is crucial because kids need consistent in-person learning. Children and adolescents exist on a different timeline than adults. Growth and development is measured in weeks and months. Development is rapid and exciting but that also means that when opportunity is missed or delayed, that lost time can be unforgiving for children. We saw this in the spring, when school closures led to regression of developmental milestones for our children with special health needs who missed out on much-needed services. Educators have been racing against the clock too, trying to catch students up and re-engage learners who have fallen behind. There are critical time periods for motor and sensory development, for social emotional learning, for academic progress. Kids can't afford to lose more time.

We have always known that there would be cases of COVID-19 in schools because schools reflect what is happening in the community. We continue to see that schools are not a main driver of transmission in this pandemic. The fact that there have been a number of cases where an infectious person has entered the K-12 learning environment and has not transmitted the virus highlights the effectiveness of the mitigation strategies we have in place in VT. But keeping schools safe is not the sole responsibility of students, teachers, and staff. Community rates need to be kept low. As the days get darker and colder and we enter the holiday season, following the guidelines will be more important than ever in order to keep kids in school. This is the responsibility of all Vermonters.

Vermont continues to lead the country in management of COVID-19. We continue to have a very robust and phenomenal contact-tracing program to find cases and prevent the spread of the virus. Despite that, we are seeing increased cases of COVID-19 and we are certainly not immune. Due to the increased rate of activity in Vermont, the Vermont Department of Health has broadened the testing recommendations to include more contacts of cases and anyone who has been at a social gathering. Within the next week or two, additional testing locations and testing through self-administered nasal swabs will be available 7 days/week.

Please do your part to keep COVID-19 out of the schools so we can keep our kids in school and our communities healthy.