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***This statement provided on behalf of Branch & Calhoun County superintendents:***

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**COVID-19 CASES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLS**

*A letter to the school community*

As school superintendents in Branch and Calhoun County, we want to acknowledge the extraordinary patience of our students, parents, and staff during these difficult times. Their understanding during this pandemic has been critical in keeping our schools safe. The collective hard work of local schools alone, however, will not control community spread of the coronavirus.

Reports from public health experts show significant increases in positive cases across the state and our county within recent weeks. Health officials cite that the rise in cases is largely due to a lack of safe practices -- mainly distancing and mask wearing -- in social settings and community gatherings.

If cases continue to trend upwards, the Branch and Calhoun County Health Departments may ultimately have to implement additional restrictions to prevent continued infections. Restrictions may include cancellation, or other limitations, of extracurricular activities like athletics, band, choir and drama. A worst-case scenario is that schools may be directed to shift to a distance learning instructional model either periodically or for an extended period of time until cases decline.

While safety remains our number one priority, we also acknowledge the important role local schools serve for our entire region. Schools are vital in meeting the academic, social, emotional and physical wellbeing of students and families. We are determined to keep schools safe and open, but we need help from everybody.

To mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in our county and to keep schools open, we ask that every citizen continue to follow the CDC recommendations regarding social distancing and wearing a mask at all social and community gatherings. We have worked too hard over the last several months to reverse course now. On behalf of the students and communities we serve, we thank you for your continued support.

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