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October 28, 2020

Dear Tri-County Head Start Families and Staff,

In March, we were abruptly introduced to COVID-19 and the uncertainty of how that would shape our future. Now, we are at the end of October, and we are all feeling the stress and strains of isolation, uncertainty, and anxiety over where this pandemic will take us.

In these past seven months, I have witnessed our staff handle these difficult changes with grace, patience, and an unwavering commitment to high-quality experiences for the children and families we serve. Our families have been as inspiring and, they have committed to safety and taken the dedication of educating their children to a whole new level. For this, I am so proud; you have handled every demand we have faced as we try to protect everyone and continue to educate our children in the most unusual circumstances.

Keeping everyone safe and most of our locations open has taken a collective effort. Within our organization, we have worked hard to ensure that we are mitigating the spread of COVID-19 by creating a safe environment for children and staff. We require daily health screenings for both children and adults, limiting visitors to our centers, wearing face coverings, social distancing, cohorting, and sanitizing and disinfecting with new safety procedures. In addition to our mitigation strategies, our staff has worked diligently to ensure that, if need be, we are prepared to transition to remote learning swiftly and without interruption to students' academic progress.

We know that even if our buildings are closed, the learning never stops. These measures have helped limit the number of positive cases and close contacts within our program, and I am proud to say our efforts are working.

Unfortunately, the same protocols have not been uniformly practiced within our community at large. The Berrien County Health Department and the Van Buren/Cass District Health Department have reported significant increases in positive cases in our three counties. While this news is unsettling, we also know that these positive cases, exposures, and transmissions occur outside of the school settings. Having schools operational has a significant impact on children, families, and our community. Schools' collective hard work is not sufficient in controlling community spread, and the increasing community numbers put our in-person learning at risk.

We must work together to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. Outside our school buildings, we must follow the same protocols and procedures working so well within our school buildings.

We encourage you to follow the necessary protocols when in public and encourage your friends and families to do the same. We can keep schools open if we all commit to working together.

Thank you for your continuous support, flexibility, and resilience during these unprecedented times.

Sincerely,

Chanda Hillman

CEO/Executive Director

Tri-County Head Start Mission: *To be a vibrant and progressive educational agency supporting the development of children 0-5 years of age while promoting healthy family functioning for Head Start children and families in Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties.*