

Charles D. Baker, Governor
Marylou Sudders, Secretary, Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Margret Cooke, Acting Commissioner, Department of Public Health
James Peyser, Secretary, Executive Office of Education
Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Samantha Aigner-Treworgy, Commissioner, Department of Early Education and Care
Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA 02133

Re: Universal masks in schools

Dear Governor Baker, Secretary Sudders, Acting Commissioner Cooke, Secretary Peyser, Commissioner Riley, and Commissioner Aigner-Treworgy:

Your masking decision announced on Friday, July 30, 2021, violates the data-driven school health recommendations from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and more than 200 medical and public health experts right here in our Commonwealth. **We call on you to require masks indoors in schools for everyone age 2 and up, regardless of vaccination status, unless medical or developmental disability precludes it, consistent with CDC and AAP recommendations.**

As your own state epidemiologist Dr. Catherine Brown recently published, the Delta variant is present in Massachusetts and highly transmissible.¹ Not only is Delta as contagious as the chickenpox, leading to more cases among children especially when unmasked in school together, but also Delta may cause more severe disease² and experts anticipate an increase in severe cases³ and deaths⁴ among children because of the variant. One recent report found that an additional 70% of children could be infected with COVID-19 within three months of the start

¹ Brown, Catherine M. et al., *Outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 Infections, Including COVID-19 Vaccine Breakthrough Infections, Associated with Large Public Gatherings – Barnstable County, Massachusetts, July 2021*, MORBIDITY AND MORTALITY WEEKLY REPORT, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, Jul. 30, 2021, available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7031e2.htm> (last visited Aug. 1, 2021). Dr. Brown also concluded that “even jurisdictions without substantial or high COVID-19 transmission might consider expanding prevention strategies, including masking in indoor settings regardless of vaccination status....”

² *Improving communications around vaccine breakthrough and vaccine effectiveness*, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, slide 18, Jul. 29, 2021, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/cdc-breakthrough-infections/94390e3a-5e45-44a5-ac40-2744e4e25f2e/> (last visited Aug. 1, 2021).

³ Smith, Hayley and Deborah Netburn, *For parents of unvaccinated kids, worsening Delta variant brings alarm, questions*, LOS ANGELES TIMES, Jul, 31, 2021, available at: <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-07-31/what-the-delta-variant-development-means-for-unvaccinated-kids> (last visited Aug. 1, 2021).

⁴ Edwards, Erika, *Covid vaccines for kids under 12 expected midwinter, FDA official says*, NBC NEWS, Jul. 15, 2021, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/vaccines-kids-under-age-12-expected-mid-winter-fda-official-n1274057> (last visited Aug. 2, 2021) (“Given that children are one of the groups that is unvaccinated, we will see more cases in children,” said Dr. Richard Besser, a pediatrician and former acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “We will see more hospitalizations in children, and unfortunately we will see more deaths in children.”)

of school without masking.⁵ More cases among children, of course, will lead to more cases in our communities and significantly increase the risk of school shutdowns, which in turn increase the risk of yet another round of havoc for children, parents, teachers, small business owners, and others.

Without question, the risk is greater among unvaccinated individuals, and as you know no child under age 12 can yet access a vaccine against COVID-19. With physical distance requirements for the upcoming academic year already rescinded, vaccination unavailable to children in child care programs and grades K-6, and insufficient vaccination rates among youth in grades 7-12 to provide meaningful community protection, masks are critical to mitigating COVID. They must be worn by everyone, regardless of vaccination status, to protect against Delta transmission, ensure enforceability, provide consistency, model good health behavior, and avoid wholly unnecessary bullying.

Contrary to gross misconceptions, masks *do not*: make it harder for children to breathe, interfere with lung development, cause carbon dioxide poisoning, or weaken immune systems.⁶ You have plenty of resources available to you to know that you should not fall prey to such dangerous disinformation peddled by the anti-vax/anti-mask movement. Masks are not a muzzle; they are a simple and highly effective tool in our COVID prevention toolbox.

Masks work. We know this. Masks are a primary reason why schools had relatively low transmission last year. A mask-optional or honor system approach is proven to fail; just ask CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky.⁷ So too will your July 30 announcement fail to protect children and families throughout the Commonwealth, particularly people who are immunocompromised or otherwise at greater risk for serious COVID illness.

If the health and safety of children isn't enough to persuade you, perhaps you might think of the school committee members and teachers and school staff and administrators who have been berated by vaccine- and mask-opponents for months on end. These local leaders deserve effective support from you, not another punt of the COVID football.

Stop playing politics with public health. Stop gambling with the health, safety, and lives of children, families, teachers, staff, and everyone involved with school communities. Do the right thing – the thing that the overwhelming number of leading scientists tell you to do – require

⁵ Smith and Netburn, *supra* note 3.

⁶ Dickinson, Kimberly and Theresa Guilbert, *Mask Mythbusters: 5 Common Misconceptions about Kids & Cloth Coverings*, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS, last updated Jul. 21, 2021, available at: <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Mask-Mythbusters.aspx> (last visited Aug. 1, 2021).

⁷ Wilner, Michael, *CDC director blames COVID setbacks in spread of delta variant on unvaccinated people*, McCLATCHY D.C. BUREAU, Jul. 30, 2021, available at: <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/coronavirus/article253156748.html> (last visited Aug. 1, 2021) (“Our guidance in May said that fully vaccinated people could take off their masks safely, and that unvaccinated people should continue to wear them. Unfortunately, that’s not how it played out,” Walensky said in a phone interview with McClatchy. “Unvaccinated people took off their masks as well. And that’s what led us to where we are today.”).

masks in schools for everyone age 2 and up unless medical or developmental conditions prohibit use. Do not let the anti-vax/anti-mask propaganda machine win in Massachusetts. Do not threaten children's constitutionally guaranteed right to attend school safely by failing to protect their health with something so simple as a mask.

We are Bay Staters who accept and embrace science. We demand you do the same and protect our children, families, and communities with universal indoor masking in schools this year.

Signed,