



American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

AFT Teachers
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Miguel Cardona
Secretary, U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave. S.W.
Washington, DC 20202

Rochelle Walensky
Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
395 E St. S.W.
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Drs. Cardona and Walensky,

Now that we are well into the 2021-22 school year, I write to share the experiences and concerns of public school educators who have been deeply engaged in the work of addressing their students' academic, social and emotional needs since schools reopened. Thanks in large part to the extraordinary work of the Biden-Harris administration, the good news on COVID-19 is abundant: 195 million Americans are fully vaccinated, including more than 90 percent of educators; the overwhelming majority of schools are open for in-person learning; the effort to get COVID-19 testing in schools has been monumental; and fully 10 percent of 5- to 11-year-olds have received their first shot. With this progress in mind, we can remain clear-eyed about the challenges before us but still look to a future in which the pandemic is better tracked and contained; a future with increasing vaccination rates and with more guidance and benchmarks on testing and masking; a future in which communities can reset and find their new normal.

For the most part, our country enjoyed a successful reopening of in-person schooling this fall. At the same time, it has been a very tough year for our students, their parents and their educators. As you know, the AFT mounted an aggressive back-to-school campaign, I personally visited 55 schools in 20 states since Aug. 1. I have seen incredible devotion to our students by their teachers, support staff and administrators, who day and night help our students not just recover but thrive. And while the CDC guidance, the vaccines and the resources from President Biden's American Rescue Plan have been vital for a safe reopening, we are facing challenges as we try to meet our students' social, emotional and academic needs and navigate the overwhelming desire for a return to normalcy in children's education and lives.

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.



We know that masks have helped stop the transmission of the virus and saved countless lives. In fact, a recent study suggests that mask wearing reduces COVID-19 infections by 53 percent.¹ In the wake of so much good news, and the yearning for normalcy, I frequently hear from AFT members and parents in our communities as to whether indoor masking will continue forever. For example, there are reports coming from some classroom teachers that the constant use of masks impedes the learning process. A number of parents have expressed dismay about their child's overall well-being after wearing a mask continually for well over a year and a half. We are all concerned about the data showing the great exhaustion and stress and strain both educators and parents have endured as a result of COVID-19 and its effects. And as an asthmatic, I personally struggle to breathe while wearing a mask indoors. With this in mind, we are wondering what circumstances and standards will be used as the basis for changes to current guidance on testing and masking.

Let me be clear: most educators and parents understand the importance of masks when it comes to safety, and of course we are all watching COVID-19 rates tick up again. We respect the science and are grateful that indoor masking has been adopted by many schools and districts as a means to start this school year. But as we know, our ability to prepare for what might happen down the road increases our likelihood for success. What no one wants is that the guidance change without notice or time to prepare. So rather than schools and school districts make decisions to stop masking, as they are starting to do in the absence of guidance, we are asking the CDC and the Education Department to start a transparent process and work with educators and parents on the metrics and standards for easing indoor mask requirements without sacrificing safety.

One idea we'd like to lift up is the recent announcement from Massachusetts that in schools where 80 percent of the population (adults and kids) are vaccinated, the mask mandate is waived school by school. We'd encourage studies to verify if 80 percent is an appropriate threshold for this waiver. If this guidance does not come from the federal government, districts will decide on their own—and will not necessarily use science to make those decisions.

We would love to see the CDC conduct more research to explore strategies such as dynamic masking, as described here.² While the cited article is far from conclusory on whether community transmission levels are the right metric, we need to have deeper exploration of science-based solutions that will enable school officials to adapt to the pandemic landscape in their communities. The impact of incorporating high vaccination rates and the use of rapid testing into the mix should also be examined.

¹ <https://www.axios.com/covid-spread-mask-wearing-incidence-study-0c49653a-714c-4adb-8780-c968822035ea.html>

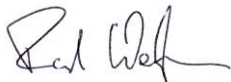
² Leah C. Rowland, Martin D. Klinkhammer and Dana W. E. Ramirez, "Dynamic Masking: A Proposal of Burden-Based Metrics for Masking in K-12 Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic," Nov. 8, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13099>.

In a similar vein, we know the CDC has weighed in when it comes to masking outdoors.³ Unfortunately, this guidance is not as well-known as it should be, and we would ask the Education Department, the CDC and other federal agencies to help lift it up. It would be helpful for enforcement of indoor mask policies if the administration uplifted the CDC guidance that masks are largely unnecessary for vaccinated people when outdoors. That will help more kids have outdoor mask breaks, particularly during recess.

Increased vaccination among the school population and accessibility of rapid tests so that we can have a more tailored approach to removal from school when children and others in the school community are infected by the virus are also incredibly valuable incentives as well. And we'd encourage all these things, while reinforcing the message about the importance of outdoor recess, sports and the possibility of outdoor classroom learning when possible.

With vaccines widely available to just about everyone, we are craving the light at the end of this pandemic tunnel. Let's be clear, we do not want to sacrifice safety, but both parents and teachers want to know what the best science guidance is on when we can ease indoor masking. Please consider educators and parents as your partners in getting to the end.

Sincerely,



Randi Weingarten
President, American Federation of Teachers

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³⁴ In general, people do not need to wear masks when outdoors. CDC recommends that people who are not fully vaccinated wear a mask in crowded outdoor settings or during activities that involve sustained close contact with other people. Fully vaccinated people might choose to wear a mask in crowded outdoor settings if they or someone in their household is immunocompromised." <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html#mask-use>