

August 18, 2021

Governor Roy Cooper
Speaker Tim Moore, NC House of Representatives
President Pro Tem Phil Berger, NC Senate
Superintendent Catherine Truitt, NC Department of Public Instruction

Dear Governor Cooper, Speaker Moore, President Pro Tem Berger, and Superintendent Truitt,
Thank you for your hard work and your leadership for North Carolina's children. Next week, over one million children will go back to school in North Carolina. For many this will be their first time in a school building in 18 months. We are overjoyed for these students to get back to in-person learning.

I write to you today with an urgent request to implement a statewide requirement for all students, staff, and visitors to wear masks in public schools, so that our students may attend school safely, with much less need for quarantines, and fewer school days missed.

As you know, COVID rates are increasing rapidly in our state. Rates of community transmission are currently considered “high” or “substantial” in nearly all North Carolina counties.¹ Vaccination rates are low among teens 12-17, and a vaccine is not yet available to children under 12. Children make up an increasing percentage of those hospitalized with COVID, as the Delta variant seems to be more transmissible among young people.

NC Child is deeply concerned about the harm to children that would result from another year of school closures and extended quarantines. I know you share this concern – and that's why I'm writing to you today to ask for a statewide school mask mandate *before* over one million of our children return to classrooms.

In states like Florida, Mississippi, and Texas where school has begun without mask requirements, thousands of students are already quarantined and missing out on in-person learning.

Some North Carolina schools have already started the year. In districts without a mask requirement, COVID outbreaks have already forced large quarantines, leading some local boards to reverse their mask-optional policies. This is deeply unfair to students. In mask-optional school districts, children face peer pressure about whether to wear a mask, increased risk of COVID exposure, and an increased likelihood of being quarantined and missing school.

Ample Evidence that Masks Prevent COVID-19 Spread

North Carolina-based research shows that consistent use of masks in schools is effective in preventing the transmission of COVID-19. According to the ABC Science Collaborative, made up of physicians and scientists from Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and leading scientists from 13 states across the nation: “Proper masking is the most effective mitigation strategy to prevent COVID-19 transmission in schools when vaccination is unavailable or there are insufficient levels of vaccination among students and staff.”²

Recent modeling by a team of researchers from NCSU, UNC-Chapel Hill, East Carolina University, and Georgia Tech found that universal mask requirements at school dramatically reduce COVID transmission among students. They went on to say: “Our modeling found that without masks or regular testing, up to 90% of susceptible students may become infected by the end of the semester. This high rate of infection would result in frequent quarantines of students and transmission to others.”³

Physicians, Scientists & Health Leaders Urge Mask Requirements at School

Considering the weight of the evidence, physicians and health leaders have strongly recommended requiring masks at school. The American Academy of Pediatrics calls for mask-wearing in all grades.⁴ The N.C. Pediatric Society recently wrote to all North Carolina school boards and superintendents, urging school boards to prioritize in-person learning for students by requiring masks in all grade levels.⁵

CDC guidance recommends that masks be worn by all students, staff, teachers and visitors in schools regardless of vaccination status.⁶ The StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit says that “all schools should require all children and staff in K-12 grades to wear face coverings consistently when indoors.”⁷

In-Person Learning Should Be Our Top Priority

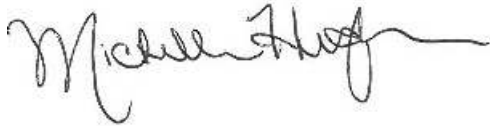
Most students learn best in-person. Being at school brings children many social and health benefits that go far beyond learning. Children learn social and emotional skills by being together. They get healthy meals and exercise, mental health services, and other support.

As advocates for children, we are deeply troubled by the increased rates of depression and other mental health challenges among young people during the pandemic. Furthermore, school is a safe place for children suffering physical or sexual abuse, or living in homes where there is domestic violence. Last year extended school closures cut off many of these children from the support and resources they needed from teachers, social workers, and other trusted adults.

Because of these important factors, it is essential that we take every step to ensure in-person learning for our children this school year. Under current conditions, the best way to achieve that is to require masks in all grade levels.

Thank you so much for your consideration. I greatly appreciate all that you are doing for our children and our communities.

Sincerely,



Michelle Hughes, MSW
Executive Director, NC Child

cc: Dr. Mandy Cohen, Secretary of NC DHHS

Citations

¹ Centers for Disease Control, August 9, 2021. "COVID Data Tracker." <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view>

² ABC Science Collaborative, June 30 2021: "Report Shows that N.C. K-12 Schools Reopened Safely, Paving the Way for Schools Nationwide to Limit COVID-19 Spread in the Classroom" <https://abcsciencecollaborative.org/report-shows-that-n-c-k-12-schools-reopened-safely-paving-the-way-for-schools-nationwide-to-limit-covid-19-spread-in-the-classroom/>

³ August 5, 2021. "School-level COVID-19 Modeling Results for North Carolina" <https://covsim.hosted-wordpress.oit.ncsu.edu/school-level-modeling-results/>

⁴ American Academy of Pediatrics, July 18, 2021 "COVID-19 Guidance for Safe Schools." <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

⁵ NC Pediatric Society, August 2, 2021 "Open Letter to School Boards and Superintendents." https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.ncped.org/resource/resmgr/covid_19/ncped_masks_for_back_to_sch.pdf

⁶ Centers for Disease Control, July 28, 2021. "Interim Guidance for Fully Vaccinated People." <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated-guidance.html>

⁷ NC DHHS, August 10, 2021. "StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit" <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/164/open>