

Why I Oppose School Mask Mandates

By Richard Norman Rickey

September 7, 2021

Back in early August the Centers for Disease Control sternly decreed that all 56 million children attending our public schools should be forced to cover their faces in order to help prevent the spread of COVID. They didn't specify what type of facial covering, and it didn't matter if the child was vaccinated, living with family members who had compromised immune systems, experiencing COVID symptoms, or recovering from COVID. Marching to the CDC orders, many school districts are implementing mask mandates for their students and faculty. Those school boards that chose not to mandate, but highly recommend mask wearing, leaving the choice of masking to the parents, are often criticized by the mask mandate mob as being "unscientific", or worse, of being calloused COVID spreaders who endanger the health of their students, their loved ones, and even their own school employees.

I'm opposed to these mask mandates primarily because I don't believe it has been proven scientifically that mask wearing all day in schools reduces COVID transmission occurring inside schools in a significant way. Furthermore, this virus is not as severe a health threat to school age children as some other communicable diseases. I've yet to hear a public health official citing strong scientific studies clearly showing such a benefit from a full-on masking strategy. One study in late May cited by the CDC shows some reduction from masking by unvaccinated teachers, and improving air ventilation, but found no statistical benefit at those schools that had face covered students. I've looked in all the nooks and crannies I know of, and can only find one single retrospective study on the question, and its results were inconclusive. This lack of evidence may be why the World Health Organization has child-masking guidance that is much less rigid than our own CDC. Many other developed nations such as in Scandinavia, France, and Ireland have exempted kids, with varying age cutoffs, from wearing masks in classrooms.

Another reason for my opposition is that the mandate seems more like virtue signaling to me, rather than a serious attempt to reduce COVID transmissions. There are numerous studies that show the N95 respirator mask filters at least 95% of airborne particles. Cloth masks offer much less protection, if any. This is why we want our surgeon to be wearing a N95 when she performs surgery on us. If our policy makers were really serious about reducing the COVID spread in schools, the mandate would be that all children wear an N95 mask. But have you ever watched children in activities together all day long? How many children would comply with the strict habit of properly wearing their N95 mask? 50%? I'll bet many of my readers have a naturally compliant child who would, and a sibling who won't even keep their socks on throughout the day. Do we really expect all our school age children not to exchange masks, wear them on their head, around their neck, or use as a sling shot? For this strategy to work, each school would need to employ mask compliance officers roaming the hallways to assure the mask stays on the face, and fit perfectly.

Who would deny that the discomfort of a mask distracts some children from learning? We also know that reducing air flow both in and out can lead to increased levels of carbon dioxide in the blood. Masks get filthy when not replaced. If you remove air borne disease risk reduction as a reason to wear a mask, wearing one is detrimental to health. There also seems to be some social alienation that occurs from mask wearing, and most likely, some psychological harm. Facial expressions are integral to human connection. They signal fear, confusion, happiness and contentment. Covering a child's face mutes these signals that are integral to being a human being. Mandatory mask wearing all day at school, the very place our kids get to interact with others more than any other setting, also has an element of dehumanizing because it censors, or at least distorts, the natural communication that occurs between kids. This is not to condemn masks, but only to point out that there is so much more to consider on the downside of mask mandates when performing cost-benefit and risk analysis.

Weighing all the negatives, against the actual benefits of school mask mandates for virus harm reduction, leads me to advocate for voluntary mask wearing, and more school choice opportunities. I believe we should put the power to make safety-related schooling decisions in the hands of parents. Parents know best how to weigh COVID, and other health and safety risks to their children. Each household, depending on their family health history, will perceive the risk differently. These draconian one size fits all school closures and mask mandates should drive more families into the school choice camp that I've been advocating for. It gives families trapped by their local school districts policies a way of escape. No child should be required to attend a school that her parents consider unsafe, or overly restrictive.