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October 2020

**To:** BOCES District Superintendents  
Superintendents of Public Schools  
Public School Administrators  
Charter School Administrators  
Nonpublic School Administrators

**From:** Kathleen R. DeCataldo

**Subject:** Responding to the Challenges of Learning in Masked Environments

### ***Students Who Do Not Wear Masks***

Proper use of masks is essential to minimizing the spread of COVID-19 even though wearing a mask for an extended length of time can be physically uncomfortable and lead to changes in mood and behavior. Inevitably, there will be students who do not wear a mask for a variety of reasons and, in order to respond thoughtfully and with compassion, it's important that educators and administrators attempt to determine the student's reasons before responding.

We are never fully aware of others' experiences and traumas. Especially during the pandemic, it's an essential part of the educational process to facilitate students' and staff members' understanding of the risks of not wearing a mask or face covering. It's also particularly important that understanding and education is provided in a language with which students are most familiar, and that understanding is confirmed with students with disabilities or alternative learning styles. Attending to how students learn and what they need to fully understand the information provided will result in a greater level of comfort and safety for all involved. Nevertheless, people who do not wear masks or face coverings put themselves, those around them, and those they live with, at higher risk of being infected with COVID-19 if they carry the virus home with them.

**In cases where a student has simply lost or forgotten their mask, provide one.** If someone has forgotten to cover their face after eating or taking a drink, remind them of the reasons we wear masks and ask them to cover their face. If the student states that they didn't replace their mask because it became wet, damaged, or soiled, school personnel should provide a new mask.

Discuss the reason for wearing masks with the student and help them to understand how wearing a mask allows them to be kinder to the people around them by helping others avoid becoming sick, including those people they live with in their home.

### **Determine whether the student's failure to wear a mask is intentional.**

Although not unexpected behavior due to developmental stage, a disability-related need, or other legitimate reason, some students may refuse and/or are unable to wear a mask, or wear a mask properly, in the classroom. For other students and staff in the classroom, the refusal of those individuals to conform to health requirements will cause increased anxiety and concerns regarding the transmission of COVID-19.

Schools should consider providing assistance to students who display difficulty adapting to wearing a face covering for an extended period of time. Simple steps such as offering the option of a mask break in an area that is away from others, possibly outdoors when weather permits, may be all that's necessary to encourage compliance with the requirement.

Students who request to remove the mask or face covering must be permitted to for a short period of time. When doing so, the student should be in a location at least 6 feet away from others such as a mat in a removed area of the classroom, chair, or other area designated for mask or face covering or time out breaks. School personnel should be mindful that some students will not be able to sit during a mask break, so they need to provide that student the ability to move, such as stretching, marching in place, or going for a short walk while supervised. At all times, proper supervision needs to be in place for students taking a mask break.

### **Determine whether there may be a valid reason for a student's refusal to wear a mask.**

If a student indicates they cannot wear a mask or face covering due to a health or mental health condition, or a parent/guardian indicates such on their behalf, ensure that the student is distanced at least six to twelve feet away from other students and staff, depending on the current activity. Contact the school nurse, medical director, or administration for further direction. School policies need to be explained to parents, so they are aware of any additional documentation that needs to be provided, or whether other alternatives are available based on the student's needs, including disability-related needs. Communication should be in the parents' preferred language, and interpretation should be made available upon request.

**When a student refuses to wear a mask or face covering and does not communicate a compelling need for exemption, support the student in understanding the potential impact of their actions.** Nonconforming behavior presents an educational opportunity to facilitate students' and staff members' understanding of each other and the impact the pandemic has had on families and individuals. Many students are members of families and communities experiencing poverty and civil unrest, and many of these same communities are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. A growing number of students have lost family members that have died due to the COVID-19 virus. Their lives and significant relationships have been ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. Empathetic understanding of the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma students may be experiencing provides opportunities for teaching students and staff members to examine and reconsider the feelings expressed through the nonconforming behavior.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) supports trauma-responsive practices by nurturing skills and communication that better equip school staff and young people to manage their responses to triggering experiences. In the process, resiliency skills are developed, and life-long outcomes improve. Consider engaging in restorative dialogue, restorative circles, and peer mediation with honesty and openness about the impact their behavior has on others. Some students may have heard adults say that they have a “constitutional right” to not wear a mask or face covering. This should lead to a class discussion about the school code of conduct. Similarly, for older students, this is an opportune moment for a class discussion about constitutional rights, and how they apply in a school setting.

Overall, students should not be singled out, disciplined or excluded from the classroom for occasionally failing to wear a mask or face covering. Concerns about the potential for increased virus transmission while the mask or face covering is removed can be mitigated by increasing social distancing to more than 6 feet and practicing good respiratory and hand hygiene.

**If all methods have been exhausted and there is reason to believe that the student poses a health risk to other students and staff, it may be necessary to transfer them to remote learning until the situation can be resolved.** We encourage school personnel and administration to treat this as a learning opportunity rather than a disciplinary matter. Communicate the school’s responsibility to protect the health and safety of all students and staff, allowing the student to return to in-person instruction at any time they agree to wear a mask or face covering.

### ***Social Emotional Well-Being and Strategies for Teaching and Learning in a Masked Environment***

Masks and face coverings present new social and emotional challenges for students and adults alike. A mask limits a substantial portion of our capacity for nonverbal communication by covering the lower portion of our face. This can lead to feelings of greater isolation and disconnection, even within a group.

The following suggestions offer strategies to acknowledge and mitigate some of the limitations we encounter when using masks and face coverings:

- **Share your own experience verbally and model strategies for students.** If you’re feeling frustrated because you’re finding it difficult to communicate, let students know that, and show them the strategies you use to self-manage. You might say, “I’m frustrated because I can’t see your expressions, and you can’t see mine. That makes me feel a little anxious sometimes, so I’m going to take a few slow, deep breaths. Would you do that with me?” This normalizes feelings they might also have and encourages them to talk about them in a comfortable setting.
- **Hang a picture of yourself without a mask in a place where students can easily see it.** This way, they can look at the picture any time to know what your face looks like.

- **Take pictures of students whose parents/guardians allow it and hang them around the room so that students can see the faces of all their classmates.** Pictures help to humanize us when our faces are covered.
- **Spend extra time getting to know each other's personalities, interests, and passions.** Consider using props or objects of personal significance and encourage students to do the same.
- **Practice recognizing how facial expressions affect the eyes.** What do smiling eyes look like? Sad eyes? Questioning eyes? Have students practice recognizing emotions in masks, either with one another, or using pictures.
- **Teach and practice explicit language to describe feelings.** Regularly checking in verbally with each other about how we're feeling is more critical when we're less able to read emotions through facial expressions. Support these check-ins with opportunities to journal or draw.
- **Regularly remind students of expected behaviors for use of masks or face coverings.** Talk about how wearing masks and face coverings protects us. Use journaling or drawing to reinforce understanding the proper way to wear the masks or face coverings for better protection for ourselves and others.
- **Encourage students to keep a small object in their desk that they can hold onto or manipulate if they feel anxious or stressed.** This could be something personal that they bring from home, or if budget permits, an object selected by the teacher, such as a stress toy.
- **Communicate with parents and caregivers.** Ask them for tips about how they help their child release stress and anxiety and how you can help their child be more comfortable. Learn from each other by sharing experiences and observations about their child's reaction to the pandemic, isolation from others, remote learning, and the physical return to school. Include family engagement for English Language Learner and Immigrant families to promote understanding and encourage the use of masks and face coverings.
- **Create a no-mask zone.** If your school/district's policies and space allow, use tape to mark no-mask/face covering areas at least six feet apart so that one student at a time may go to take off their mask or face covering for a minute or two. These could be inside a classroom or on a playground. Ensure there is adequate supervision and that no furniture or manipulatives are accessible in these areas (to ensure students are not in contact with unsanitized shared surfaces).
- **Allow mask breaks.** If possible, build a 15-minute no-mask or face covering break (in appropriately supervised spaces with adequate ventilation) into the daily schedule for all students and staff.

## References

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