



Washington State Legislature

August 9, 2021

Governor Jay Inslee
Office of the Governor
PO Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

Dear Governor Inslee,

First, I want to convey my appreciation for your administration's commitment to providing all students full-time, in-person learning. This is long overdue in light of the many sacrifices and hardships students and their families have faced (as outlined in your proclamation from last school year). However, now it appears those hardships will continue with your newest order requiring the masking of everyone in schools, both public and private.

This broad order makes no differentiation between younger students or vaccinated students and staff. The only exception, besides those for specified disabilities, is to allow vaccinated staff to not wear masks indoors when no children are present. Repeatedly during your press conference last Wednesday, the reason given for this requirement is to protect children who are unable to be vaccinated. However, the vaccine can be given to children ages 12 and over, but no deference is given to those students when it comes to masks. As mentioned by your public health official during the press conference, the risk of breakthrough is low, and the main drive of transmission is from unvaccinated individuals.

For those students who are not vaccinated, either because they are too young or otherwise, the risk COVID-19 presents to children is extremely low. According to the DOH's own data dashboard, those between 0-19 years of age make up 0.16% of deaths from COVID-19. Hospitalizations are also statistically miniscule. Of those who were affected, it's unclear how many had additional underlying medical conditions, but it's more common for that to be the case, according to the CDC. The bottom line is we need to focus on what's best for students. They have already faced extensive learning loss, significant mental and behavioral health issues, and more.

Masks take away from students being able to learn effectively, especially when it comes to younger students learning to read. Teachers use their mouths to show how to make the sounds of different combinations of letters, which students then repeat. Teachers can see which students are getting it and which ones are struggling. This exercise of "sounding it out" is vital and unlocks a world of words and knowledge. As it is well known, literacy is crucial to the future success of a child. Masks interrupt learning, speech and language development, and can also further isolate students who are already struggling.

While my preference would be to leave masking decisions solely to parents, there should at the very least be local control when it comes to this issue. School districts and their communities vary greatly statewide. Local school districts should make this decision in concert with the parents in their communities. Even a change to make mask requirements dependent on certain measures (i.e., vaccination rates, hospitalizations, community spread) would make more sense than this new policy.

As you mention in your proclamation, student/parental choice must be respected. For parents who do not want their kids to suffer with masks, the only option left is to homeschool. However, this isn't an ideal solution for many, and could lead to a number of new problems, including further enrollment declines—which are already hitting school budgets.

As you may have seen, Superintendent Reykdal has sent a letter to all school districts threatening their constitutionally protected education dollars if any district defies this new order. Washington state has made enormous investments in K-12 schools in recent years. Those investments should not be threatened by this broad decision. Should those education dollars be withheld from schools, I believe the state would face further litigation.

At this point in the pandemic, COVID-19 vaccines have been widely available for months for almost everyone in Washington state. Teachers were specifically prioritized in the hopes schools could reopen again in a timely manner. These vaccines are effective and important, and I continue to encourage all eligible Washingtonians to consider getting vaccinated. Those who choose not to are taking a potentially fatal risk, but this should not result in children being punished. Their sacrifice needs to end.

For the sake of Washington students, I urge you to reconsider this order.

Sincerely,



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9th Legislative District
Washington State House of
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6th Legislative District
Washington State House of
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14th Legislative District
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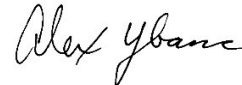
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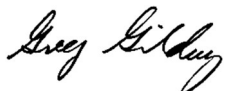
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