

Dear members of the Public Health Committee,

As clearly stated by the governor and the commissioner of public health on Monday, Connecticut is in a much better place with the pandemic than we were two years ago. It is time to learn to live with this virus. Vaccines, therapeutics, masks, and tests are now available to those most at-risk. We must now pivot away from mandates for all to individual responsibility and choice. Eradication of this virus is not an achievable goal.

Coronavirus is just one aspect of public health. Socio-emotional health has suffered in this pandemic and has had a much greater impact on our youth than illness from the virus itself. In addition to the isolation caused by remote learning, masking has also impacted social relationships and communication for our children.

As a teacher, I have witnessed the negative impacts of masking. First, it is difficult to understand students, and it is difficult for them to understand me. We feel like we are constantly playing a game of "telephone." Inevitably, someone drops their mask just to be understood! Second, many students are reluctant to speak in class, more so than in the past. They hide behind their masks. Third, many of my teenage students avoid confronting the normal awkward social challenges of teenagers. Masks conveniently hide their braces and acne. Students do not learn how to accept themselves as they are, and even to accept how others look. In fact, many don't even know what their peers look like! Finally, and most importantly, masks dehumanize us. There is no doubt that students have had decreased empathy for each other, partially because they have not been able to see and interpret each other's facial reactions. Bullying and fights have increased.

District communities are best-equipped to make decisions about masking in schools. Every community should decide on the level of risk that they are willing to live with. With the most recent wave, many teachers and students, including my own family and myself, have had and have already recovered from Covid. We are guaranteed immunity for at least 3-6 months, if not more. We pose no threat to others at this time.

It is time to move on and say goodbye to mask mandates. If not now, I fear we will never find "the perfect" moment to do so.

Thank you for your consideration,

EJ

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