

To Whom It May Concern,

"It's just two weeks", "it's just a mask", "it's just when you go out", "it's just in the grocery store", "it's just for 6 hours at school". Our students have been swayed these past two years every which way regarding the masks rules. They have forgotten what their friends in school smile looks like. Children have also forgotten what it's like to look across the room and giggle at their friend, they have to assume their emotions through their eyes because their mouth is always covered. Although our children are extremely adaptable, two years is far too long with masks on their face. Our students have faced shut downs with remote learning, social distancing and having their mouths covered for YEARS now. Our kindergarten and first grade students have never had a "normal" year of school, not to mention our students with disabilities, such as the ones I teach, are at an absolute disadvantage. They are faced with rules of not joining inclusion because they cannot wear a mask due to effects of their disability, or they are unable to speak with it. These students are doing the best to figure out life and school rules, let alone ever-changing mask rules and quarantine rules.

Teaching students how to talk properly and "sound out their words" with something masking your mouth has proved to be the greatest challenge, which teachers happily accepted, however, two years is far too long. We are teaching our students with disabilities about social cues and emotions, with our face and theirs covered, how does that make sense? As a special education teacher, we have to look at our students' eyes to decipher the multitude of emotions felt every day, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

I remember the first time I walked into a cafeteria and saw students sitting 6 feet apart not allowed to talk because of the fear of spreading Covid. Two students to a table during lunch and silence because the air we breathe out while talking might infect someone. As a child I remember lunch being one of my favorite memories in school was socializing with my friends and we have ripped that away by putting all of our faith in the mask's and social distancing, for a virus that is going to keep spreading (and has even with mandates in place). Everyone in school has both been affected and done their part, but two years is far too long. The simple answer for legislation would be "allow students with disabilities to be exempt in inclusion settings" however, our students already feel uncomfortable and unwelcome, let alone if they look different than everyone else for wearing a mask. All of our students are suffering from a face cover that has been debated to even protect our scholars of the future.

Thank you,  
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Special Education Teacher