

To the Public Health Committee:

I urge you to continue the school mask mandate. Many school districts have a week-long February break coming up and students will return to the classrooms on February 28 after traveling throughout the USA and other countries. Furthermore, BA.2 - a more highly-transmissible virus with a higher degree of immune escape - is on the rise in Europe; we tend to lag behind them by one to two months. To step back into classrooms without masks after everyone is returning from travel has the potential to create another wave or increase the potential for more rapid spread of BA.2 that people will bring back from their vacations. I also want to add that throughout this pandemic, a great deal of research has been done in aerosol studies on musicians and athletes. Music programs in Connecticut have continued by using bell covers on instruments, distancing singers, and using other mitigation strategies in music classes and rehearsals as well as sporting events and P.E. classes. If we eliminate the mask mandate and all of those other mitigation strategies, we are denying the science behind the studies about transmissibility of infections. We also have the issue that many public school buildings in Connecticut have children under the age of 5 and they aren't eligible for vaccination at this time.

I am a 53-year-old public school music teacher and church organist/music director in the State of Connecticut. I taught at WCSU for five years, but returned to a K-5 classroom 9 years ago. I love my jobs, my school district and my 350+ students. I have been teaching in-person since August 2020 in spite of an extremely high-risk health condition called Primary Immune Deficiency. I am basically like 'bubble boy' (a story you may remember from a few decades ago.) I have a genetic immune system disorder and have already survived 13 bouts of pneumonia and other life-threatening infections. I cannot afford to get pneumonia again. I have taught in person, played concerts, conducted musical groups, played organ, conducted church choirs and more - in spite of my medical condition. I have pushed through by wearing high-quality N95, KN95, KF94 and N99 masks - even double-masking with these high-quality masks until I was fully vaccinated and boosted. I even played a concert in the lobby of Danbury Hospital on December 23 to thank the staff for all they do (and I wore an N95 mask!).

I am fully vaccinated with 4 shots at this point - which gives me confidence to be in public if I also wear an N95 masks - especially when you also consider my immune globulin infusions twice a month - but I am also concerned because vaccines don't usually work on people with my condition, so we don't know if the vaccine truly has an impact. Working remotely was and is not an option given to Connecticut teachers with high-risk health conditions, so I continue to put on a brave face and go to work in person every day.

All throughout the pandemic, I have supplied my own N95 masks for work and have tested regularly with PCR or at-home antigen tests. Now it's **your turn** to continue to mandate masks in schools and do the right thing by the children and families of Connecticut, especially with the coming surge from BA.2 after all of the travel in February.

I have to add that I find it incredibly ironic that the governor is still holding press conferences by zoom and the state legislature and various committees are having virtual hearings (for safety reasons?) but are considering taking away masks from overcrowded schools with poor ventilation. The irony is not lost on me.

Regards,

Kathleen Theisen
DANBURY, CT
kathleentheisen@gmail.com