

Hello. My name is Kathy Gilbert and I am the director of Methodist Nursery School in Fairfield, CT. After receiving my Masters in Curriculum & Teaching from Columbia University, I was a 1st and 2nd grade teacher in NYC and Westchester County, and then after having my own children, started working as a teacher (and now administrator) at Methodist Nursery School where I have been employed for the last 19 years. Unfortunately, I am unable to attend the hearing because I will be working, but will I am sharing my comments below.

I never claim to know more than an expert, whether that be a parent, a pediatrician, a specialist, a scientist, or other. But what I can tell you is that I know a great deal about early childhood development and have first hand knowledge in working with young children (and staff) in an early childhood environment. I am not claiming that I have the expertise that a pediatrician or epidemiologist has with regards to virology, for example, but I can assure you that I do have expertise on what is important in early childhood development and like I said above, I have several years experience in early childhood settings. Unfortunately, early childhood is often the last place to be given attention, and in my opinion, is the most important age group to consider with regards to how social and emotional skills develop. Learning is so vastly different in early childhood settings versus primary and secondary school settings. Which is why it is so crucial to take a closer look at us and what our learning looks like.

We are a play-based program at Methodist Nursery School whose primary focus is on children's social and emotional development. We believe that for learning to happen, we first need to form relationships with our students. Young children do not have a lot of expressive language so we rely on facial expressions to help us communicate and strengthen student-teacher relationships. Having a strong and trusting relationship with a child then allows some real learning to happen. The children begin to learn how to be part of a group, to take turns, to listen to others and engage in conversations, to respect boundaries, to understand how to resolve conflicts, and much much more. Early educators cannot do our true work with masks on which is why I believe we need to have mask choice.

My stance on mitigation strategies with regards to Covid protocols has **evolved** over the last few years. When the pandemic emerged, I was in agreement with closing schools, remote learning (for primary and secondary schools), mask wearing, heightened disinfecting strategies, and more, because this was a new virus and we knew so little. Last year, and because of my strong stance that early childhood learning should **not** happen remotely, I was pleased that young children were able to attend school in person and play alongside their peers. This year, with vaccines and testing widely available, and now knowing so much more about the virus, it needs to go further than me being pleased that children can play alongside one another. Now we must get back to our real work as early educators and eliminate the mask mandate which disregards what is of utmost importance in early childhood- the children's social and emotional development.

I have been a huge proponent of following the science but I also have first-hand data from the preschool environment upon which I work. We should use both tools (data from science and data from people who have first hand experience) and come together to collaboratively decide on what is best. Masks do not work efficiently with young 3-5 year olds. Some young children are able to wear them more correctly than others, but as a whole, we cannot expect a young child to appropriately wear a mask. Most of the masks get wet from mouthing, are touched throughout the day by the child and the teacher. Is this spreading more germs? As far as our staff, we are all fully vaccinated and boosted. We know Covid is here to stay. I am looking forward to when the vaccine will be available for this young age group so parents can decide whether or not to vaccinate their child.

I understand that there is a vote happening soon to determine if an extension of the executive orders will be granted. There are 11 executive orders and each order is different. Why are they being voted on in one bundle? They should be voted on separately. If the executive orders are voted on in one bundle, then it is clear to me that we are dealing with a partisan issue. As a democrat, I can tell you that this is wrong, and so very sad. We need to vote for what is right for our children, not for what is right for a political party.

Please consider again our youngest students- the ones who cannot wear masks properly. The ones that do not have a mastered expressive language skill set. The ones who, through studies, have been known to not have detrimental side effects when positive with Covid. Let parents and staff decide whether or not to wear a mask. Having just recovered from Covid, I would choose not to wear a mask so I could help our students transition into each new school day with a warm and welcoming smile. Also giving parents reassurance through my facial expressions that their child is safe in our hands. We will have staff that will choose to wear a mask and some who won't. We will also have students whose parents will choose to send them in mask, and others that won't. It is time to let us decide what is the right thing for ourselves and let parents decide what is the right thing for their children.

Thank you for listening.

Best,
Kathy