

Good afternoon, State Senators & State Representatives. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Linda Whitridge. I was raised in Old Greenwich and have lived there now for the past 14 years with my husband, raising our three daughters through the Greenwich Public School system. I have recently become a part of the Greenwich RTC and have great respect for all of you in our state government - I thank you for what you do.

I wanted to start with the words of my 14 year old daughter, Ella, and her friend, James.

Our names are James and Ella. We are eighth graders at Eastern Middle School in Riverside.

As you know, for two years, we, like every student belonging to the Greenwich Public School District, have had to sit through 7-hour days wearing a mask, with little to no time to breathe open air minus a 20-minute lunch period where we have to sit 6 feet apart in seats sectioned off from others by plexiglass dividers which offer barely any visibility. We, like every student, have gone through two years of not seeing our friends' smiles and barely catching a glimpse of our teachers' real faces. All of the social-emotional training that has slowly made its way into the school environment was almost instantaneously flushed out by the seemingly never-ending mask mandates which prevent us kids from being who we are. Masks are uncomfortable pieces of cloth that are the opposite of safe. They cut short our each and every breath. For kids with glasses, they make it practically impossible to see anything, which can't be fixed because of the constant berating from teachers to keep your mask on. Which brings us to our final point.

*Like every student, we haven't been able to **be kids** for 2 years. We've been deprived of all normalcy and regularity in school. These are two years of our lives we can never get back, but our school administration has made it seem like all of these things can be chalked up to an "indefinite state of emergency". Our governor has now said he would let each district choose whether or not these outrageous standards will continue and it's time for our district to become a leader and not a follower by doing what is best for its students. We are asking you to make the logical decision to make masks an option, not a requirement, in schools. Please give US the choice. We can no longer be used as human shields for this virus and it is right to give back this freedom to kids.*

I am further speaking today as a parent, on behalf of my own three kids as well as the kids who don't have a mom or a dad that is able to be here today to speak up for them. It is a FACT that personal choice has been ripped from our hands, and if those of us who can speak up do not, who do these kids have? I am in their corner, fighting their fight. We are meant to be a government OF the people, BY the people, FOR the people. That is not how Governor Lamont and the State of Connecticut are functioning at this point.

We must no longer use language regarding a "Covid emergency" for the kids of our state, who not only have never been at high risk from the virus, but who have taken the brunt of every mitigation strategy commanded by the government. There IS one true emergency, and that is the urgent need to deal with the fallout from these strategies and the fear-filled propaganda that

has smothered our kids for the past two years. The first step is to make masks a **parent's choice in our schools, immediately.**

For the past two years, our kids have felt the constant pressure of keeping everyone safe, of behaving well and keeping their mask up, of 7 hours with minimal minutes of fresh air, of not seeing their friends faces, of sitting 6 feet apart from one other person at a long table facing in the same direction, of cancelled field trips, of taking a bite of snack and quickly having to return the mask over the nose while they chew. Even the fact that the school mascots wear a mask... it's too much. We must let these kids move on. They have anxiety, headaches, social issues, reading delays, speech delays, brain development issues... the facts are there, the data is there. Why would you, HOW could you not listen?

Governor Lamont wants to extend his emergency power and then put the power of the mask mandate in the hands of the Boards of Education. This will do nothing but divide us further. How is this the right thing? Different towns, different populations, different school districts all with a random compilation of mandates. Why should some of these kids continue to suffer from the ill-effects of masking? Who will be unlucky enough to live in a district that decides to continue this harmful mandate? Why should those parents NOT have a choice like others will hopefully be granted by their town boards.

Parent choice is the way to end this, and the only way. You cannot continue to take advantage of the children and their parents to bolster whatever political scenario they happen to be living within. In CT, that has meant lack of freedom and lack of personal choice. That needs to end now.

Thank you,

Linda Whitridge