

Good morning Connecticut legislature. My name is Dr. Nilani Shankar. I am a Ph.D. level psychologist, a Nationally Certified School Psychologist, and a Licensed Professional Counselor in the state of Connecticut. I am a school psychologist with Regional School District 13 in Durham/Middlefield/Rockfall.

I am here to rally all of our representatives – Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and Libertarians alike – to support and speak on behalf of all of our students, especially our youngest who do not have a voice. I would like you to understand the repercussions of these measures that were taken since the beginning of the pandemic back in March 2020. I work at a pre-K to second grade elementary school. I have seen, first hand, the negative results of these measures with extremely young children.

The masks' detrimental effects on students' academic learning, social-emotional learning, and mental health are awful. As a school psychologist, a large part of my job is conducting cognitive (or IQ testing), social-emotional, behavioral, and autism testing with children. Because of the masking, none of the tests that I give are a valid measurement of a child's functioning. These tests were not designed to be administered with masks, not to mention other PPE protocols such as Plexiglas dividers and social distancing. Furthermore, I cannot even code and score an autism test called the ADOS-2. This is a standardized test which, before the pandemic, used to provide me with valuable data. My school team values this test in combination with other data to determine special education eligibility during PPT (Planning and Placement Team) meetings and whether or not a student qualifies for an educational diagnosis of autism. I have not given an ADOS-2 to a child since February 2020.

I also teach weekly Second Step lessons at the preschool in my district. Second Step is a social-emotional-learning curriculum with lessons. A huge part of the curriculum is teaching and identifying feelings to young children. Masking three and four-year-olds makes it beyond challenging for the children to successfully learn social and emotional skills. **By requiring the masking on three and four-year-olds, you are going beyond a reasonable challenge for these students to be successful learners.** These lessons cannot be taught while students are wearing masks. The only thing that students are able to recognize in other students are eyes, eyebrows, and body language. Facial expressions are the most important part of identifying feelings in others and they are left out of these lessons. Not being able to see facial expressions is an extreme disadvantage to students' learning lifelong skills such as social and friendship skills.

In addition to the masks, I find the quarantine protocols ineffective for our young students' learning. My observation is that young students learn best through in-person learning. I have students on my counseling and testing caseloads that have been out for an extended time due to the quarantine protocols. Not only the students, but my coworkers have also been out on quarantine which impacts the staffing of the entire school. We are consistently short-staffed. Our reading and math teachers are pulled to cover whole classrooms, leaving students without a teacher for their reading and math support. This year alone, I have gotten so many more referrals to test students for special education eligibility and many more that are coming this month. I question if there is a true learning disability for a student or if the real issue is lack of proper instruction and lack of in-person attendance.

I am well qualified to speak out about students' mental health surrounding these executive orders. Our students are suffering. I am inundated with in-school counseling referral requests. My caseload is larger than it has ever been. My students are in crisis daily. The students at my school do not have the choice of whom to sit next to for lunch. At recess, they can no longer play with anyone in their grade – it all depends on which class they are grouped with. I have also observed the impact of distance

learning on students' mental health. No young student should be isolated from other students in this way. **This pandemic is a real mental health pandemic.**

It makes me sad to see the young students that I work with suffer unnecessarily. I want my students to be happy and I want to see them thrive in all areas of school – academically, emotionally, and socially. The masks, quarantining, and other PPE measures are a true deterrent to student learning. Surely, all of these executive orders will have repercussions years later for my students. Even a recent study from Johns Hopkins University found that mandates such as lock downs were ineffective and should be rejected. Furthermore, I know of many other scientific studies that show that masks are ineffective.

I am counting on all legislators, regardless of political party affiliation, to think about our students and their futures. These executive orders need to all go.

Respectfully Submitted By:

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Continuation of Emergency Declarations & Limited Executive Orders Informational Hearing