

I work with high need special ed elementary students, K-5. I have also worked with post-high school students in a job and life skills program. I have worked with deaf and hard of hearing students and my own father relies on reading lips to interact with the world. All of my students work better when they can see my face and lips without the mask. Every student who has been forced to wear these masks without having any concept of why has regressed in speech goals and has developed tongue thrusts and/or oral fixations regarding the mandatory focus on their face. Every student's behaviors have been worse with the masks. My more verbal autistic students have frequently had very visible battles with their mental anguish of being forced into these masks and the situations surrounding them and the part of them that tries to convince them of how the world works. It's quite frankly child abuse to these students.

However, I must make known the fact that these issues are by no means reduced to students with an IEP or who receive special services. I interact with almost all the students through the school in one way or another. The Kindergarten children in masks is a joke. Their masks are constantly disgusting and they too can be seen chewing and tonguing them all the time. They are not the only ones; these issues can be seen all the way to the oldest students for the most part. I have noticed that most student's speech is completely different without masks indicating to me that they have developed lazy or non-optimal speech patterns which will need to be corrected later. Their behaviors are disinterested and mischievous especially when it's clear that they can barely hear their teachers, but lacking their teacher's facial features is clearly detrimental to them. I have seen students of all ages having a good time and playing hard during gym but stopping suddenly to tear away the mask and gasp for air only to be "reminded" to put the mask back on. And again, this is all in addition to the general atmosphere that something is very wrong. Multiple candid conversations and quips have made it clear that all of this is having a horrible effect on these students from bullying to having certain student tell others that their family members will die because of a lack of understanding.

The emergency is long over and we should be thanking God and be ever grateful. Deaths are few and it's really about time we remember that illness has always and will always exist. We are so fortunate that we think it reasonable to attempt to eradicate illness, but the time has come to realize that fixating on numbers of cases only breeds paranoia. We need to allow families to make decisions for their children and we need to allow as many children as possible to scramble back as much of their childhood as they can that has been lost for the past few years. My special kids deserve the right to a full and complete education without a major component of communication blocked and without feeling that they are suffocating in more ways than one. I myself have migraines from masks and have developed a skin condition because of them - one of many people with similar conditions. Please be reasonable and allow us to make our own decisions and we will allow you to make yours. Thank God that this is not a true emergency and remember that places which allow choice already are seeing comparable if not lessened case numbers anyway.

Please help my many students and friends to regain some glimpse of normalcy again. Thank you for your time.

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