



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Testimony  
In Support of

## **LD 1461 An Act to Prohibit School Boards from Implementing or Enforcing Mask Mandates**

Dear Senator Rafferty, Rep. Murphy and esteemed members on the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is John Eder and I represent District 136 in part of Waterboro, Alfred and part of Lyman.

I brought this legislation before you today to address a significant aspect of our collective experience during the COVID-19 pandemic: the impact of masks in schools. While masks were implemented with good intentions to protect the health and safety of our students and staff, it is essential to recognize the negative effects they brought to our educational environments.

First and foremost, one of the most significant challenges masks pose is their impact on communication and social interactions. Masks obstruct clear communication, especially for younger students and those with hearing impairments who rely on lip-reading and facial expressions. Research has indicated that masked communication hindered language acquisition and social development in children, making it difficult for them to engage fully in classroom activities. A study in the Journal of Communication in Healthcare emphasizes that these barriers lead to misunderstanding and frustration in educational settings<sup>1</sup>.

Moreover, the psychological impact of prolonged mask-wearing cannot be overlooked. Many students reported feelings of anxiety, discomfort, and social disconnection because of wearing masks. A survey conducted by the American Psychological Association found that a significant number of students felt isolated and stressed due to the requirement of wearing masks in school<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, a study published in JAMA Network Open noted a marked increase in depression and anxiety symptoms among children and adolescents during and following the pandemic, with reports indicating that about 43% of youth experienced mental health challenges, a significant rise compared to pre-pandemic levels<sup>3</sup>. The CDC reported alarming increases in teen suicides, indicating that the mental health crisis among adolescents has deepened in the wake of the pandemic, with an estimated 17% of high school students reporting suicidal thoughts in 2021, compared to 14% in 2019<sup>4</sup>. This lack of social interaction and the difficulty in expressing emotions can contribute to declining mental health, which is an ongoing concern for educators and parents alike. We see these negative consequences echo on today.

Additionally, there are reports of physical discomfort associated with extended mask use. Many students experienced headaches, breathing difficulties, and skin irritation when wearing masks for long periods. A study

published in Headache: The Journal of Head and Face Pain highlighted that some children faced heightened discomfort, particularly during physical education classes or other activities requiring increased physical exertion<sup>5</sup>. This discomfort may discourage participation in essential activities, further affecting their overall well-being and hindering the learning environment.

Furthermore, the enforcement of mask mandates has unintentionally created divisions within school communities. Parents, students, and staff often have differing comfort levels with mask-wearing, leading to tensions and conflicts. A study published in Educational Administration Quarterly found that such divisions can undermine the sense of community within schools, ultimately impacting the educational environment and students' experiences<sup>6</sup>.

While we recognize that the intention behind mask mandates was to curb the spread of respiratory diseases, evidence on the overall effectiveness of masks has been mixed. A systematic review published in The Lancet examined the efficacy of mask usage in preventing respiratory virus transmission, including COVID-19. The study found that while masks can reduce the risk of transmission, their effectiveness varies based on context and type of mask<sup>7</sup>. This nuanced understanding of mask effectiveness highlights the importance of considering viable alternatives and complementary strategies for maintaining health in schools.

Additionally, we must consider the significant impact of the pandemic protocols on learning outcomes of which masks played a significant role. The loss of learning during COVID-19 has been documented extensively. A report from McKinsey & Company highlighted that students in grades K-12 experienced substantial learning setbacks, with many falling behind an estimated 5 to 10 months in mathematics and up to 4 to 8 months in reading<sup>8</sup>. These learning losses are devastating and permanent, especially for younger students whose foundational skills were being established, and they illustrate the long-term implications of interruptions in education, further exacerbated by health protocols like masks.

Finally, while masks were intended to promote health, excessive focus on these measures can detract from the core mission of education. The emphasis on health protocols, including mask mandates, may shift attention away from essential academic goals and support systems for students recovering from the disruptions caused by the pandemic. A report from the National Education Association emphasizes the need to balance health measures with the importance of academic learning and emotional support for students<sup>9</sup>.

In conclusion, while mask protocols may have been well intentioned, we must acknowledge the great and lasting harms this experiment presented within our schools. From communication barriers to physical and psychological impacts, to the community divisions they caused, the consequences of prolonged mask-wearing have highlighted the importance of finding a balanced approach to health and education. To wit, parents can make their own health choices for their children as to whether to mask or not. As we move forward, let's work together to recognize our missteps and promote a safer and more supportive learning environment for all students. Given the decidedly failed experiment of requiring masks in schools, this bill would prohibit school boards from implementing their own mask mandates outside of a statewide order. Thank you.



John M. Eder  
State Representative

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