

TIMES OBSERVER

Offering choice on school masks not ‘frustrating’

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As a mom and a former teacher, Bucks County resident Jamie Walker knows the importance of education. And she’s exasperated by policies that have been instituted in the wake of COVID-19, such as Pennsylvania’s mask mandate.

“The mask mandate is frustrating on several fronts,” she says. “A few weeks ago, I attended a back-to-school night at Central Bucks South High School. I felt like I was in a hospital. I couldn’t understand what teachers were saying. I couldn’t see anyone’s face. This environment is leading to learning loss. A few nights later, I was at a Guns N’ Roses concert with 7,000 mostly unmasked fans.

This is madness. Especially considering Pennsylvania’s guidance is so different than the World Health Organization (WHO), Europe, and ‘red’ U.S. states.”

She’s not alone in her frustrations. The third consecutive pandemic-affected school year has been marked by raucous debates over school mask mandates. As of Oct. 15, mandates have been issued in 16 states and Washington, D.C.; nine states have bans on mandates, and four of those have their mandate bans in legal limbo. In Pennsylvania, lawmakers unsuccessfully pushed to have the statewide mandate be subject to oversight like other regulations. District or county mandates add even more layers to disputes.

Meanwhile, countries throughout Europe, including the U.K., Ireland, and Denmark, exempt most children from mask requirements. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control

recommends against masking in elementary schools. The WHO says young children should not be masked and recommends a risk-based approach for children aged 6 to 11.

These flexible policies are likely driven by the fact that children up to age 17 have the lowest COVID hospitalization rate – typically less than 1%. And the delta variant, although more contagious, does not appear more dangerous to children. Moreover, recent op-eds by doctors in the Wall Street Journal and The Atlantic show that the scientific case for masks on young children is not settled – particularly given potential negative impacts on developmental skills, mental health, and more.

While the CDC’s recent studies on masks invoked headlines such as “*COVID Outbreaks Far Higher at Schools Without Mask Mandates*,” the studies are far from conclusive that masks are the best solution. Neither study controls for other potential factors like teacher vaccination rates, and one states explicitly that “*causation cannot be inferred*.”

Considering the lack of consensus on the need for masks, there’s no justification for one-size-fits-all policies like Pennsylvania’s. Families should be able to choose schools that meet their needs, whether they’re for or against masks.

Parents who worry about the negative effects of masks may not have the resources to move their children to other schools. While Arizona and Florida have introduced scholarships for families who object to a district’s mask mandates and other COVID-19 policies, most states lack similar options.

These scholarships are helpful, but they should also be available for parents who want more stringent policies. In Florida, when the governor banned mask mandates in public schools, private schools took different approaches. Grace Success Academy decided to implement masks. Little Star Center, which serves many students on the autism spectrum, decided to use other mitigation strategies.

Whether parents prefer masks or not, the ability to choose a school with the policy best suited for their family is vital. This is the rationale behind a bill proposed by Wisconsin state Rep. Barbara Dittich to allow parents to access open enrollment and school choice programs if they disagree with school COVID-19 policies.

Unfortunately, private schools have been swept up in mandatory mask mandates in Pennsylvania and several other states, including New York, Oregon, Virginia, and Washington. These top-down decrees prevent private schools from pursuing more innovative solutions.

For example, Christian Central Academy near Buffalo spent more than \$200,000 on safety strategies like new ventilation and additional teachers to enable smaller class sizes. Many families enrolled in the school based on its “*mask optional*” policy. Then, just two weeks before the start of the new school year, New York imposed a mask mandate on private schools.

The school unsuccessfully sued to avoid losing families who don’t want their children in masks all day. According to Michael O’Hara, Christian Central Academy’s Director of Advancement, “*Unfortunately, despite showing the safety precautions we’ve taken, we lost our case. We’re now weighing our options moving forward.*”

One-size-fits-all schooling is never ideal, but it’s even worse when basic health and education hang in the balance. A “*winner takes all*” approach results in wrenching conflicts, and masking has produced some of the worst seen in years. Rather than burdening parents with heavy-handed mandates, we must empower them to choose the educational environment that works for their children — in Pennsylvania and beyond.

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