



CNN medical expert: "The science has changed" on mandatory masking in schools

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Dr. Leana Wen is getting pummeled for this clip on righty social media this morning, but for different reasons. Some scoff at her claim that it's the "science" that's changed recently rather than the politics of forever-masking for Democrats and their allies in the expert class as the midterms approach.

And there's truth to that.

But others object to her cloaking her position in the authority of "science" when, really, what's changed is Wen's cost/benefit analysis about the value of masking, something anti-maskers have complained about since the start of the pandemic. Too often scientists and public health officials have prioritized maximum COVID prevention over important countervailing considerations, like the psychological burden of masking on kids. To decide now that there's something to that and to hand-wave away the shift as being attributable to "the science" illustrates Bill Maher's point about experts needing to show more humility towards contrary views. Since the science about a novel virus is constantly shifting, today's fringe position could be tomorrow's conventional wisdom.

As you watch the clip, though, note that Wen **does** acknowledge at the end that she's doing a cost/benefit analysis. "The science" is one component of that analysis and it's changed, she alleges. And she doesn't claim that anti-maskers were right all along to oppose mandates. She says demanding that kids wear masks right now makes less sense than it did. Watch, then read on.

There *are* experts out there who think cloth masks for kids never made sense, and at least one might surprise you. David Leonhardt points today to Michael "Dr. Doom" Osterholm as having been a skeptic about them from the beginning. Osterholm has always backed high-quality masks as a containment measure, but cloth? For children? During Omicron?

"It doesn't work," Michael Osterholm, a University of Minnesota epidemiologist, told me. Among the reasons: Medical masks are designed for adults, not children, Osterholm notes. Even

masks designed for children slip off their faces. Children take off their masks to eat. Add in Omicron's intense contagiousness, and the benefits of mandates may be tiny...

Of course, the costs of mandates may also be small for many children, especially older ones. For others, though, the costs seem larger. NPR's Anya Kamenetz has cataloged them: Students can't always understand teachers; young children, unable to see faces in classrooms, may not be developing emotional skills; and children of all ages are having a harder time making connections.

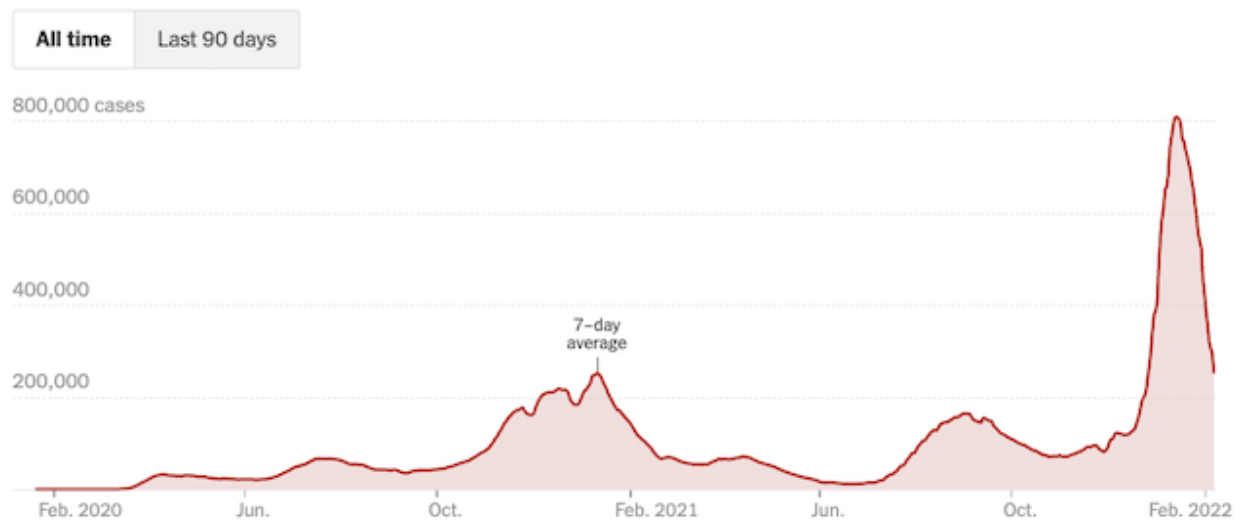
"They're not developing empathy," Stephanie Avanesian, a Los Angeles mother, told NPR. "It's taken six months for my fifth grader to make friends because it's so hard to tell what people are doing."

Has the science changed recently to shift the cost/benefit analysis on school masking, as Wen insists? Sure, in some ways. For starters, it's reasonable to assume that a variant as hypercontagious as Omicron, which multiplies 70 times faster than Delta in infected people, is more likely to evade the protection of a mask than previous variants did.

The new virus is less virulent too, reducing the risk of severe illness to adults if their child brings Omicron home from school. More kids are also now eligible for vaccination, Wen notes, in case a worried mom or dad wants to hedge against their kid's (already tiny) risk of a severe illness. And we've learned more about how well N95s protect the wearer even when those around them aren't masked. A teacher who wants to minimize their exposure in class can wear one and feel safe even if their students are barefaced.

And of course there's this:

New reported cases



Between the tens of millions of Americans infected over the past six weeks and the 250 million or so who've been vaccinated, Jim Geraghty guesstimates that there are few of us left post-Omicron with no immunity to COVID. Even experts like Scott Gottlieb are predicting a lull in

the pandemic this spring as Americans reap the benefits of the heightened immunity. So why not let kids unmask for now, says Wen?

The science has changed. Temporarily.

For some Democrats, though, it'll never change. [The Guardian](#) reports on liberals in Virginia who are mortified that Glenn Youngkin wants to give parents the right to opt their kid out of the state's school mask mandate.

Most families in Virginia support precautions such as masks in schools. "He keeps saying things about, 'Oh, it's parent choice,' but he's actually going against the majority of parents," Paterson said of Youngkin.

Two-thirds of Virginia parents with students in public schools supported mask mandates in a September 2021 poll – slightly higher than the 61% of Americans nationally who supported the mandates in a November survey. Both surveys were conducted before the highest rise in Covid cases so far seen in the pandemic.

"I would think the Omicron wave made people more nervous, not less," said Neal McCluskey, an education analyst at the Cato Institute...

"It's an inconvenience, but if it could possibly just keep one person safe, or keep one kid from having to be homeschooled, why wouldn't we do it?" said Cori, a high-school theater teacher who asked to use a pseudonym.

Mask kids indefinitely, even during lulls in the pandemic, if it keeps just one person safe? By that logic we could eradicate COVID entirely and still force students to mask forever in the name of preventing deaths from flu.

I'll leave you with this fascinating poll result from [Axios](#) which captures the policy dilemma for American politicians. As you'd expect, the less restrictive options here carry much more Republican support than Democratic while it's vice versa for the more restrictive ones. Fully a third of Dems want to *increase* mask mandates and vaccine requirements, says Axios, even though the country is exhausted with COVID to its marrow and may be enduring an exit wave from the pandemic. Imagine being a Democratic governor in a purple state trying to navigate these political waters.

How should the U.S. handle COVID-19 at this time?

Survey of 1,049 U.S. adults conducted Feb. 4-7, 2022

Open up and get back to life as usual with no mandates or requirements



Move towards opening up, with precautions



Mostly keep precautions and requirements in place



Increase mask mandates and vaccine requirements



Data: Axios/Ipsos poll; Chart: Kavya Beheraj/Axios