



## ‘A slap in the face’: uproar in Virginia as governor relaxes school mask rules

**Most families want masks in schools – so why did Virginia’s new governor make them optional?**

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Emily Paterson was finally feeling able to relax. Her two sons were now fully vaccinated, and with mask policies in place at their school in northern Virginia she felt safe sending them every day, even as the Omicron variant surged.

Then Virginia’s new governor, Glenn Youngkin, took office on 15 January of this year – and, with his second executive action, he made masks in schools optional.

A Virginia judge has blocked Youngkin’s order for now, allowing school districts to continue to enforce mask mandates in schools.

But the decision “immediately threw the whole state into an uproar”, Paterson said. “It felt really like a slap in the face. We felt really happy that this year wasn’t virtual, and that we could rely on our kids going back to school in person and being safe. So it was pretty shocking.”

Virginia isn’t alone in attempting to roll back precautions against Covid, as Omicron cases begin to fall in parts of the US and public backlash continues against public health measures.

Kansas stopped contact tracing after many of those contacted refused to participate, and a Florida’ health official has said it’s time to “unwind” the “testing psychology”.

In other places, however, the premature abandonment of restrictions is being met with its own opposition.

The Fairfax county school board, which is Paterson’s home district and the largest in Virginia, quickly announced it would continue requiring masks for all students, and a week later Fairfax

joined six other school districts in a lawsuit against the executive order. Parents in Chesapeake, Virginia, filed a separate lawsuit.

Both suits argue that Virginia law requires schools to follow guidance from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which recommends masks for everyone in schools with very rare exceptions.

Parents of children with disabilities filed another lawsuit last week against the order, arguing that it makes schools an unsafe learning environment; yet another lawsuit, filed by parents against Loudoun county's continued mandate, would support the governor's order, however.

The turmoil illustrates the fraught atmosphere in schools around removing precautions and the confusion surrounding increasingly complicated decisions in the third year of the pandemic.

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.

The majority of Virginia schools have already been disregarding Youngkin's executive order in favor of following the law on CDC guidance, according to an analysis from the Washington Post.

Governor Ralph Northam mandated masks for K-12 schools in August, and a vocal minority criticized the rule. Youngkin's reversal likely comes as a response to those objections, McCluskey said.

"And I think that it's fair to say those parents, as a group, have been much louder" – in part because the families in favor of masks didn't feel the urge to speak up while a mandate was in place, he said.

"You can sort of understand, if the parents I'm hearing from want a certain thing, and I'm not hearing from the others, maybe this group represents a whole lot of parents," McCluskey said.

Masks significantly reduce outbreaks in schools, research from the CDC shows. Schools without mask mandates are three times more likely to have outbreaks, and counties with mask requirements in schools had markedly less spread. There is no evidence that masks negatively affect children's social, behavioral or linguistic development.

"It's too soon to roll back protections, full stop," said Emily Smith, an assistant professor at the George Washington University's School of Public Health. "We are still seeing massive

outbreaks of infection. We're still seeing health systems overloaded. And that's because we haven't come to this state of the world where transmission is predictable."

Covid is still very disruptive, causing shortages of staff and goods in many industries, she said. "Now is not a time to roll back protections. Now is the time to get the pandemic under control and plan for the next surge."

Experts have suggested that precautions such as masks be tied to local factors, such as rates of vaccination, cases, hospitalizations and the overall health profile of a community – including the number of at-risk adults and children.

"We can make it very local – we can make it down to your school district," Smith said.

A small group of physicians and scientists has called for the removal of precautions including masks by 15 February, in order to get back to "normal". Others say a return to normal can only happen once the virus is controlled.

"It's inconceivable to talk about removing mitigation measures at the height of a surge," said Anne Sosin, a public policy fellow at Dartmouth College. The decisions should be based on "data, not dates".

"We don't need endless restrictions, but we are simply not at a place to be talking about that," she said of a deadline. "Maintaining rigorous school mitigation measures buys us more time to deliver vaccines and boosters."

About four out of five children between five and 11 years old are still unvaccinated and at risk for Covid. Sharp inequities persist among marginalized groups, Sosin said.

"Vaccine availability doesn't equal vaccine access, and we've seen persistent racial, income and rural disparities in vaccination," she said.

"Earlier, we saw that with significant outreach we can overcome many of those barriers, but we haven't seen the mobilization of resources to ensure equity in vaccination in children."

Advocates for optional masking say children and staff are somewhat protected by their own masks, should they choose to wear them. Widespread masking is more effective, though. Not all children are able to wear masks; some students with special needs encounter sensory problems that make it difficult to wear them consistently: masking all students and teachers during a surge helps protect them.

"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.

The masks also help keep students and staff from developing Covid complications that can arise even from mild cases, she said. "Having my children mask as a preventive measure to protect them from possibly having a lifelong health issue that could be avoidable – why would I not do that?"

The ambiguity is an additional pandemic stress, Cori said. “Every room you go into, every hallway, there’s a counselor with a kid who’s having a panic attack, and I never saw that before,” she said. Some of the kids are worried about the virus; none of the students she knows worry about the masks themselves.

“Growing minds depend on structure, so they can feel comfortable,” she said. “Their parents are fighting with their teacher, they hear a politician saying one thing, a news reporter saying another ... I think that’s terrifying to them.”

The new rule on masks “threw everyone into turmoil when the current system had been working pretty well – everyone felt there was some consistency, everyone was used to it,” Paterson said.

“One of the difficulties of the pandemic is the fact that the situation is always changing. As human beings, I think it’s really hard to understand and interpret what the immediate threat level is,” she said. She suggested Virginia and other states adopt a “traffic light” system similar to New Zealand’s, where each district’s statistics are distilled into red, yellow and green codes that would then guide their use of precautions.

“It’s not like the pandemic is ever going away in the near future, so we have to adapt by reacting intelligently to the most recent data,” she said. “I totally get that everyone is just so tired of it. But it seems like magical thinking to have that be a reason you just give up entirely on any kind of protections.”

McCluskey believes the decision should be left to school districts. “You have to take into account what other measures the schools are using for safety,” including air filtration, vaccine mandates and other precautions, McCluskey said. “That’s what we should want, to tailor the policies as best we can to the needs of actual people, rather than saying, well, one size is going to have to fit everyone.”

The mask situation is one more stressor for educators feeling the weight of the past two years.

“This debate, which didn’t need to be politicized, is affecting the educational system, which was already broken,” Cori said. “It’s hard to teach kids when their parents are telling them that you are the enemy.”

Masks and other precautions help keep schools open, Sosin said. Taking them away when vaccinations rates among children are still low and cases are still high is like “building schools on floodplains, thinking the water is not going to come”.