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Koch-backed group fuels opposition to school mask mandates, leaked letter shows

A template letter circulated by Independent Women's Forum offers a glimpse into a well-resourced campaign against public health regulations.

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The letter sounds passionate and personal.

It is motivated, the author explains, by a desire to “speak up for what is best for my kids.” And it fervently conveys the author's feelings to school leaders: “I do not believe little kids should be forced to wear masks, and I urge you to adopt a policy that allows parental choice on this matter for the upcoming school year.”

But the heartfelt appeal is not the product of a grass roots groundswell. Rather, it is a template drafted and circulated this week within a conservative network built on the scaffolding of the Koch fortune and the largesse of other GOP megadonors.

That makes the document, which was obtained by The Washington Post, the latest salvo in an inflamed debate over mask requirements in schools, which have become the epicenter of partisan battles over everything from gender identity to critical race theory. The political melee engulfing educators has complicated efforts to reopen schools safely during a new wave of the virus brought on by the highly transmissible delta variant.

The document offers a rare glimpse into the inner workings of a well-financed conservative campaign to undermine regulations that health authorities say are necessary to contain the coronavirus. The frustration of many parents who want a greater say is deeply felt, school superintendents say. But their anger is also being fueled by organized activists whose influence is ordinarily veiled.

The letter was made available on Tuesday to paying members of the Independent Women's Network, a project of the Independent Women's Forum and Independent Women's Voice that markets itself as a “members-only platform that is free from censorship and cancellation.” Both are

nonprofits once touted by their board chairman and CEO, Heather Higgins, as part of a unique tool in the “Republican conservative arsenal” because, “Being branded as neutral but actually having the people who know, know that you’re actually conservative puts us in a unique position.”

Higgins, an heiress to the Vicks VapoRub fortune, did not respond to a request for comment. Carrie Lukas, president of Independent Women’s Forum, said in an interview the letter was originally authored by the group’s policy director and sent to her child’s Denver preschool. The policy director did not consult experts for the letter, Lukas said, because, “She wrote it as a mom. She didn’t call anyone on the phone, but you can see she looked at a lot of data.”

The group decided to circulate the letter, Lukas said, to “empower people to have a kind, civil conversation.”

Lukas is a co-author of a Sept. 28 post in the network’s “Resource Center” explaining the purpose of the letter, according to documents reviewed by The Post. “Is your school considering mask mandates, or has it already made a decision that kids must wear masks in class?” the appeal begins. “Push back! Here is a draft letter you can use to write your own school superintendents and administrators, principals, and teachers!”

The letter “contains a respectful tone, helpful data, and supporting articles that illustrate the harms of masking kids,” the appeal promises. “This letter can also easily be turned into a letter to the editor for your local paper.” It is unclear how widely the letter has been used so far by members of the network, where membership costs between \$5 and \$25 per month.

The document flies in the face of recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, whose positions stress the need to account for more dangerous strains of the virus and to protect people too young to receive shots still only authorized for those 12 and older.

A pair of CDC studies published last month found that schools with mask requirements saw fewer outbreaks than those without them, and that pediatric cases rose faster in counties where schools had made masking a matter of personal choice.

In contrast with evidence provided by government scientists, the Independent Women’s Forum letter offers an inventory of inaccuracies, said pediatric infectious-disease specialists. David Kimberlin, a physician at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, was particularly troubled by the letter’s argument that “young kids do not significantly spread covid.” That notion is undercut, he said, by “data clearly showing that children can transmit the virus, perhaps to a lesser extent than older adolescents and adults, but that second part is still not clear.”

Claims guided by “political ideology, instead of data, will cause more deaths, more funerals and more white flags on the National Mall,” Kimberlin said.

As a nonprofit, Independent Women’s Forum is exempt from disclosing its donors and paying federal income taxes. But the group, which reported revenue of nearly \$3.8 million in 2019, has drawn financial and institutional support from organizations endowed by billionaire industrialist

Charles Koch and his late brother, David, according to private promotional materials as well as tax records and other public statements.

Tributes to sponsors prepared for recent galas — and reviewed by The Post — recognize the Charles Koch Institute as a major benefactor. Other backers include Facebook; Dick DeVos, heir to the Amway fortune and the husband of former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos; and the Walton Family Foundation, a philanthropy controlled by the family that founded Walmart.

Bill Riggs, a spokesman for the Charles Koch Institute and other philanthropic and advocacy organizations endowed by the billionaire, said the group's financial support for Independent Women's Forum was steered toward a program opposing occupational and labor regulations. Representatives for other benefactors did not respond to requests for comment.

The institutional ties binding Independent Women's Forum to the Koch network go even deeper.

In 2003, Independent Women's Forum announced that it was formally affiliating with Americans for Prosperity, the Koch network's main political arm, and that the two organizations would share office space. "The affiliation agreement provides for staff and resource sharing between Americans for Prosperity and the Independent Women's Forum," an archived news release stated, explaining that Nancy Pfotenhauer, then-president of Independent Women's Forum, would also serve as president of Americans for Prosperity.

The affiliation ended in 2005, said Lukas, a former policy analyst for the Cato Institute, which was first founded as the Charles Koch Foundation. She said her organization's relationship to the Koch network was "relatively minor."

Most parents of school-age children support requiring masks, polling suggests. More than six in 10 parents say their child's school should make masks obligatory, at least for unvaccinated students and staff, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation survey released in August.

Views vary along partisan lines, according to the poll, with more than two-thirds of Republican parents opposing such mandates, and racial differences are stark, as well. Overwhelming majorities of Black and Hispanic parents — 83 percent and 76 percent, respectively — support school mask requirements, compared to a slim majority of White parents, at 54 percent.

Despite the picture of public opinion conveyed by such polling, masking in schools has become an explosive local issue. School board meetings have seen violence and arrests. Outside Austin, one parent ripped a mask from a teacher's face, the superintendent reported.

The letter drafted by Independent Women's Forum illustrates how national groups are "inflaming the political fight over broadly popular mask protections," said Lisa Graves, executive director of True North Research, a liberal watchdog group, and a former deputy assistant attorney general in the Justice Department's Office of Legal Policy. "The effect is really to distort public debate."

The letter tries to distance itself from the political maelstrom, noting, “It’s my view that emotion and politics (from both sides!) have driven a lot of policy choices during the pandemic at nearly every level of government ... that’s too bad.”

Meanwhile, the letter traffics in “nonsense and extremism,” said Julia Raifman, an assistant professor of health policy at Boston University and the creator of a database tracking state policy responses to the pandemic.

The letter warns of possible downsides for children wearing masks, ranging from communication difficulties to tooth decay. But such claims lack credible evidence, she said, compared to a wealth of data showing face coverings blunt the risk from the coronavirus.

The letter also emphasizes moves by some peer countries not to mandate masks in schools. But other places have maintained indoor mask requirements for adults that have suppressed community transmission sufficiently to protect children and allow schools to proceed normally, Raifman said.

“Mask wearing can be temporary until transmission is reduced, but the children, parents and all people who die if we do not control surges will be gone forever,” she said.