



JANET QUINN &lt;janet\_quinn@msd.k12.wi.us&gt;

## Optional Masking Policy for Grades 4K-12

1 message

**Horvath, Paul R., M.D.** <Horvath.Paul@mayo.edu>

Mon, Oct 11, 2021 at 11:51 AM

To: "janet\_quinn@msd.k12.wi.us" <janet\_quinn@msd.k12.wi.us>, JOSEPH ZYDOWSKY <joe\_zydowsky@msd.k12.wi.us>, "christopher\_freeman@msd.k12.wi.us" <christopher\_freeman@msd.k12.wi.us>, "mark\_hillman@msd.k12.wi.us" <mark\_hillman@msd.k12.wi.us>, "tanya\_husby@msd.k12.wi.us" <tanya\_husby@msd.k12.wi.us>, "clinton\_moses@msd.k12.wi.us" <clinton\_moses@msd.k12.wi.us>, "karl\_palmer@msd.k12.wi.us" <karl\_palmer@msd.k12.wi.us>, "angela\_skillings@msd.k12.wi.us" <angela\_skillings@msd.k12.wi.us>, "amy\_riddle-swanson@msd.k12.wi.us" <amy\_riddle-swanson@msd.k12.wi.us>, "charlie\_schneider@msd.k12.wi.us" <charlie\_schneider@msd.k12.wi.us>, "dave\_styer@msd.k12.wi.us" <dave\_styer@msd.k12.wi.us>

SDMA Board Members;

Unfortunately, I am not able to join you in person tonight. However, I do want to take the opportunity to address the board regarding this evening's masking policy agenda item. No specific response is needed and I would like this information presented as a part of your discussion this evening.

I thank Ms. Skillings for her email response to my questions and allowing me the opportunity to learn more about her perspective on this important issue. As I have had a chance to reflect on the citations included in the agenda and our email, I have concluded that the conversation we are having is not truly about masking. It is about managing uncertainty, trying to predict the future, and the apprehension and even fear associated with each of those struggles. I will address each of these in turn.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented situation in history. The world has lived through pandemics before, but these are rare events, and each occurred within its own historical context. None of us having these discussions today has lived through a pandemic before. Even if we try to learn from the most recent pandemic—the influenza pandemic of 1912—we find vastly experience than what is happening today. Therefore, it is challenging to directly apply the lessons learned from that event to today's world. All of this creates fear in the population at large. We do not know what the best actions are to manage this unprecedented situation. We are learning along the way and that has created challenges with changing messaging, changing recommendations and the creation of divisions among our friends and neighbors. Science and understanding evolve as we learn, and we must be able to adapt as new knowledge becomes available. I marvel at how much we have learned and how much we have been able to adapt over the past 18 months.

It has been said that it is difficult to make predictions about the future. This is particularly true in the setting of this pandemic. The reality is that none of us knows when the pandemic will be over, how many of us will become ill during the event, and what the long-term impacts on our society will be. Since we lack historical experience that we can directly apply, and our knowledge is rapidly evolving, every decision we make is a "best guess" and we are unaware what impact it will have on the future.

What we do know right now is that the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing problems such as mental health challenges in our community, as Ms. Skillings pointed out. Some of the actions that we took in good faith to manage the pandemic (such as encouraging social distancing) have played a role in that exacerbation. We also know that the pandemic has disproportionately affected many of our most vulnerable populations. Disease burden, economic impact, and loss of social support have occurred more heavily in our poor and minority populations. We need to remember that those among us who are disadvantaged by any number of factors are still worthy of protecting and educating, even in these challenging times. Some could argue that their level of risk requires even more effort on the part of those of us who do not have their disadvantages to help protect them.

The pandemic is still with us. Unfortunately, we do not know when it will end. We have imperfect tools to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on all our lives. The best science tells us that using existing public health interventions, forming a layered strategy including maintaining distancing, frequent hand washing, barrier protection of droplet spread (masks), vaccines, and testing are the best tools we have available to us right now. Despite use of those tools, localized outbreaks will occur. One such breakthrough outbreak is described in the Eurosurveillance article included in the agenda. The fact that these outbreaks continue to occur does not support an argument for nihilism and, in fact, even the authors of this paper recommend "Appropriate use of masks, especially in high-risk settings is advised."

It is my suggestion that, at this point in history, the board's energies may not be best utilized by continuing to debate whether masking in our schools should be required or optional. I also suggest that the best way to manage fear

and uncertainty is through consistency and kindness. We can show these things to our students by providing clear expectations to them and demonstrating our care for their wellness. In this case, the best, consistent message is to continue the existing masking policy.

I further recommend that we turn our attention to managing the mental health concerns that Ms. Skillings highlighted. These are real, and although they certainly existed before the pandemic, they have been exacerbated over the last 18 months. I suggest that the best use of the board's resources is to develop interventions that can truly have an impact on the mental health of our students. I assert that keeping kids in school and providing them safe access to social activities through effective, multilayered COVID-19 mitigation strategies endorsed by our public health officials will have a larger impact than any single decision about mask wear. I look forward to the opportunity to have that conversation with you.

I hope you will consider this information as you move forward with your conversation this evening. I regret that I am not able to be there tonight to respond to any questions you may have and hope that you will feel free to reach out if the need arises.

Sincerely,

**Paul Horvath, M.D., FACEP** | Red Cedar Site Chair | Chief of Staff | Emergency Medicine Consultant  
| Office: 715-464-0037 | [horvath.paul@mayo.edu](mailto:horvath.paul@mayo.edu)

**Mayo Clinic Health System** | 2321 Stout Road | Menomonee, WI 54751 | [mayoclinichealthsystem.org](http://mayoclinichealthsystem.org)