

August 27, 2020

Dr. Howard Zucker, Commissioner
New York State Department of Health
Corning Tower
Empire State Plaza,
Albany, NY 12237

Dear Commissioner Zucker,

It's an understatement to say that we're writing at a difficult time for our state and nation. As we watch the coronavirus pandemic spike in other states, we're thankful for the steps that Gov. Cuomo and the Department of Health have taken in New York to keep the infection rate under control.

Those steps are the reason why we're writing. New York State has led the way in public awareness of the use of masks as a way to help reduce the spread of this virus, and we were initially heartened to see school reopening guidance from DOH that mandated the use of masks when social distancing cannot be maintained and strongly recommended the use of masks at all times.

Unfortunately, as the beginning of the school year nears and districts continue working out their reopening plans with parents and teachers, we are seeing disparate mask policies that are not leaving parents or educators confident in the safety of their district's plans. In reviewing individual reopening plans with educators in the field, it's clear that numerous plans do not go far enough in their mask policies to ensure the safety of students and educators.

For example, in Watkins Glen in the Southern Tier the policy is masks will be mandatory only when students are moving or when social distancing can't be maintained, such as passing in the hallways. But masks are not mandatory during classroom instruction, which has left local educators with little confidence in the safety of a plan that calls for them to rotate between rooms in which no masks have been in use. This issue related to no masks during instruction has similarly cropped up in Argyle in the Capital Region, and in Batavia and Naples in the Finger Lakes. The same goes for Cairo-Durham in the Hudson Valley, where an added layer of confusion reigns because of differing communication among buildings about what the requirements in the local reopening plan actually are. And at Orleans/Niagara BOCES in Western New York what's written in the local reopening plan differs from the communication staff has received from administration about when masks are and are not necessary, creating more confusion.

The list goes on.

Simply put, we believe DOH can address these issues by changing its guidance to mandate statewide that masks be worn at all times indoors, just as six feet of social distancing is mandatory statewide. We understand that there are some students who may need a medical

accommodation because they can't wear a mask at all times, just as removing a mask to eat or to take a designated mask break is appropriate. But mandating the use of masks at all other times should be a non-negotiable condition of reopening a school building.

The science shows that the current required screenings for temperature and symptoms are not wholly sufficient in capturing potential sources of contagion. It has become clear that certain individuals can be infectious but asymptomatic or presymptomatic, meaning they have the virus but are not exhibiting symptoms, such as a dry cough, fatigue or a fever. Published online in June, a review of the current scientific literature regarding COVID-19, which was paid for by the World Health Organization, found that wearing face masks protects people (both healthcare workers and the general public) against infection by the coronavirus. Considering this, as well as the novel nature of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, it is crucial that we are as protective as possible.

New York should heed this science for school reopening, just as others are. In guidance released last week, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended universal face covering use, in addition to physical distancing and other strategies to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19. AAP President Sally Goza stated that cloth face coverings "should be part of (children's) new normal." In reaction to the AAP guidance update last week, the State of Pennsylvania updated its school reopening guidance to require that masks be worn at all times during the school day, and we believe New York should do the same.

As Gov. Cuomo has said, schools can't reopen without students and educators. At this stage in the process, any step that will help the parents who would send their children to school and teachers who will staff schools feel more confident in their district's reopening plans merits not just serious consideration, but immediate action.

We thank you for your attention to this matter and await additional guidance.

Sincerely,

Andy Pallotta
President
New York State United Teachers

CC
Jim Malatras, State University of New York
Dan Fuller, Office of the Governor
Randi Weingarten, American Federation of Teachers