



KATE BROWN
Governor

August 16, 2021

Dear Superintendents and School Board Members,

Since March of last year, Oregon's children have faced unprecedented challenges and incredible hardships. As leaders, we faced difficult decisions as we acted quickly to keep children safe from a virus about which we were still learning and have learned we cannot predict. Since then, we have been partners with the shared goal of safely returning students to the learning environment we know serves them best: the classroom. Thank you for everything you have done in the last year and a half to support our students as we have all navigated uncharted waters together.

In the spring, we were able to return our students to the classroom for hybrid learning by following health and safety protocols in our schools. With over 2.5 million Oregonians now protected by safe and effective vaccines, including over 70 percent of the adult population, I know we all shared the hope that the 2021-22 school year would not be disrupted by COVID-19. One of the small mercies of this pandemic was that children did not seem as susceptible to severe cases of COVID-19 from the original strain of the virus. The frustrating reality is that the virus has mutated, and so we must again adapt our strategies to protect Oregon's kids.

The spread of the highly contagious Delta variant has changed everything. Cases and hospitalizations are at all-time highs in Oregon. Children are now becoming severely ill and requiring hospitalization in higher numbers. In Louisiana, before that state renewed an indoor mask requirement, children were filling the pediatric wards of area hospitals.

Throughout this pandemic, my north star for decisions about our schools has been to do what is best for our students. We know that students' mental, physical, behavioral, social, and emotional health is best served when they can be in schools for full-time, in-person instruction. The Delta variant puts this goal at risk. It puts our children's health and lives at risk. But, by again taking simple and effective precautions, we can still return our children to classrooms full-time this fall. That is why I have instituted indoor mask requirements for public spaces and for K-12 schools. To keep kids safe, with minimal disruptions to the school year caused by COVID-19.

Many districts have proactively implemented mask requirements and facilitated vaccination efforts, in addition to robust health and safety measures and communicable disease management plans. Thank you for leading by example, and implementing these commonsense, science-based measures to protect Oregon students.

Unfortunately, I am also aware that some leaders in the education community—including school board members in public meetings and administrators in written communications to parents—have expressed a willingness to defy, ignore, and undermine school mask requirements. Some school boards have passed or are considering formal resolutions to that effect. I am aware of one district leader who has sent a letter to parents urging them to request an accommodation for their child under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to avoid mask requirements. I find it deeply appalling that any education leader—who is supposed to be setting an example for our students—would send a communication so callous and offensive to Oregon parents and children with disabilities. ADA accommodations are in place for students who truly need them. Instructing students to lie about their disability status puts them and their peers at risk—especially those students with disabilities who are unable to wear masks themselves.

Because that's the thing about masks: they don't just protect you, they protect everyone around you. Wearing a mask is an act of kindness. By wearing masks, we are teaching our children that they can protect each other in the classroom. That we can all work together to keep each other safe. When I visited classrooms this spring, I saw children who were overjoyed to be with their friends and teachers again. For them, safety protocols were not a burden but a benefit, giving them a reprieve from virtual classrooms and isolation from their peers.

I have heard much about personal freedom when it comes to masks in school board meetings and on social media. I have not heard as much said about personal responsibility. As leaders, we have a great responsibility to our students and their futures. One of the sacred, fundamental responsibilities of a school district and its leaders is to keep the children in their care safe. It is up to us to make clear-eyed decisions based on science and fact. Flouting mask requirements will put everything we have worked towards in the last year at risk. Without the universal wearing of masks in our schools, the Delta variant will spread. COVID-19 will infect children, in some cases seriously.

Many of you have led or represented your school districts for years—long enough to know that districts must follow state law. There is no ambiguity in Oregon's mask requirements or the legal authority of Oregon OSHA to enforce those requirements. I am asking for your partnership once again, so that we can set an example for our students of how to set aside differences and work towards a common goal.

Let's work together to keep kids safe and where they belong: in the classroom. If we all do our part, years from now, when they are pursuing their careers and dreams, they can look back on this turbulent time in our history and remember how their school was a place of safety, comfort, and learning.

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Thank you for your continuing service and commitment to Oregon's students.

Sincerely,



Governor Kate Brown

cc: Honorable Peter Courtney, President, Oregon State Senate
Honorable Tina Kotek, Speaker, Oregon House of Representatives
Honorable Ellen F. Rosenblum, Attorney General, Oregon Department of Justice
Colt Gill, Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction, Oregon Department of Education
Kimberly Howard, Chair, Oregon State Board of Education
Patrick Allen, Director, Oregon Health Authority
Rachel Banks, Public Health Director, Oregon Health Authority
Michael Wood, Administrator, Occupational Safety and Health (Oregon OSHA), Oregon Department of
Consumer and Business Services

Maureen Wolf, President, Oregon School Boards Association
Scott Rogers, President-Elect, Oregon School Boards Association
Sami Al-Abdrabbuh, President, Oregon School Board Members of Color Caucus
Jim Green, Executive Director, Oregon School Boards Association
Rachael George, President, Coalition of Oregon School Administrators
Superintendent Darin Drill, President-Elect, Coalition of Oregon School Administrators
Shelly Reggiani, President, Equity Board, Coalition of Oregon School Administrators
Carmen Gelman, President-Elect, Equity Board, Coalition of Oregon School Administrators
Craig Hawkins, Executive Director, Coalition of Oregon School Administrators
Superintendent Tim Sweeney, President, Oregon Association of School Executives
Superintendent George Mendoza, President-Elect, Oregon Association of School Executives
Superintendent Eric Milburn, President, Oregon Small Schools Association
Superintendent Michael Carter, Executive Director, Oregon Small Schools Association
Cynthia Richardson, President, Oregon Association of Central Office Administrators
Lynne Griffin, President-Elect, Oregon Association of Central Office Administrators
Rose Wilde, Chair, Oregon Association of Education Service Districts
Linda Brown, Chair-Elect, Oregon Association of Education Service Districts
Superintendent Paul Andrews, President, Oregon Association of Education Service Districts
Superintendent Tonja Everest, President-Elect, Oregon Association of Education Service Districts
Gary Peterson, Executive Director, Oregon Association of Education Service Districts

Melissa Cribbins, President, Oregon Association of Counties
Gina Firman Nikkel, Executive Director, Oregon Association of Counties