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August 4, 2021

Governor Charlie Baker
Massachusetts State House
Office of the Governor, Room 280
24 Beacon St.
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Baker:

On behalf of the 23,000 members of the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts (AFT MA), I am writing to express AFT MA's deep disappointment with aspects of your Administration's recently released *COVID-19 Guidance for Districts and Schools: Fall 2021* (issued July 30, 2021).

The release of this guidance was an opportunity to lead on health and safety, but your Administration missed the mark by issuing weak and ineffective guidance on masking. Throughout the pandemic, your Administration has shown a willingness to adjust policy based on science and public input. You still have time to change course before the school year begins, and we urge you to do so by immediately instituting a universal masking mandate for all preK-12 public schools.

Problems with the Fall 2021 Guidance and How to Fix Them

The guidance issued jointly by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Department of Public Health (DPH) is deeply problematic in the area of masking. We specifically want to highlight the following provisions:

"This fall, DESE and DPH strongly recommend that all students in kindergarten through grade 6 wear masks when indoors, except students who cannot do so due to medical conditions or behavioral needs. Masks are not necessary outdoors and may be removed while eating indoors."

"DESE and DPH also strongly recommend that unvaccinated staff in all grades, unvaccinated students in grades 7 and above, and unvaccinated visitors wear masks indoors, in alignment with the statewide advisory on masking."

"DESE and DPH recommend that schools allow vaccinated students to remain unmasked."

We find it bewildering that your Administration would essentially punt on a matter as pressing and consequential as masking for children under the age of 12. A mere *recommendation* to mask is weak and irresponsible, jeopardizing the health and safety of young children who cannot protect themselves with a vaccine. Consider the following facts:

- The new Delta variant of COVID-19 is highly contagious; on the rise nationally and in Massachusetts according to numerous news reports; not very well understood in terms of its short-term and long-term health effects; and contributing to increased hospitalizations among both adults and children.
- Children can get severely ill from COVID and suffer from long-term effects; they can even die.
- Absent vaccinations, universal mask wearing has proven to be one of the most effective measures to prevent the spread of COVID.
- There is currently no vaccine available for children under the age of 12.

This last bullet needs extra emphasis. Because children under 12 cannot get the vaccine, and because an infected adult or child who goes without a mask can harm others by spreading the virus, it's indefensible to let mask wearing for children under 12 be a "personal choice" or an issue of "personal freedom." It's like smoking. Individuals can choose to smoke and bear the health risks, but people are not allowed to smoke in a public place where their choice can harm others. Personal freedoms do not extend to causing harm to others in the context of a public-health crisis. Until the vaccine is available for children under 12, we have an **ethical obligation** to protect them by mandating the most effective measure at our disposal: universal masking in schools for grades preK-6.

The discussion is arguably more nuanced for grades 7 and up, due to the availability of the vaccine for those 12 and older, but the evidence suggests that a universal mask mandate is still the best policy for protecting students, families, and staff alike:

- Both the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics call for universal masking in schools at all grade levels, regardless of vaccination status.
- With the Delta variant on the rise, evidence is growing that even vaccinated people can carry high viral loads and spread the virus to others, causing illness—e.g., the Provincetown cluster.
- Due to structural inequalities, some communities and individuals face greater barriers accessing the vaccine than others, meaning that vaccination rates may still be dangerously low in some districts and schools.
- A policy that distinguishes between vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals will be extremely difficult (if not impossible) to enforce, as there is no easy way to know who is vaccinated and who isn't.

- Students are highly influenced by their peers and teachers. A policy that requires everyone to do their part increases the social desirability of mask wearing and compliance with the safety measure.
- Our goal is to keep schools open for in-person learning. Since masking is a proven mitigation measure, a universal masking mandate increases the likelihood of slowing virus spread and keeping schools open.

For these reasons and others, we support a statewide universal mask mandate at all grades and consider it a “must” for preK-6 on ethical grounds. If your Administration is reluctant to go beyond grade 6 with a state mandate, state guidance at a minimum should make it clear that districts have the authority to issue universal mask mandates for all schools and grades and that they will be encouraged and supported by DESE/DPH in doing so. But that goal is undercut by your guidance stating that schools should allow vaccinated students to remain unmasked. How does a district implement a universal mask mandate if some students can opt out, claiming they’ve been vaccinated? And how would a district go about verifying which students are vaccinated and which are not? Can they ask? Will individuals be required to answer and provide evidence of vaccination? A bifurcated policy is setting up districts and schools for frustration, chaos, division, and failure, again underscoring why your Administration’s guidance must be rethought and revised—and why a universal masking mandate is the only sensible and effective choice.

Other Considerations

Some aspects of your guidance deserve praise, and we note a few others here as matters that warrant further discussion.

AFT MA strongly supports the state’s ongoing commitment to COVID-19 diagnostic and pooled testing in schools, including the state’s commitment to offer these services at no cost to districts. We were also pleased to see that these no-cost services include support for districts that need additional staff to conduct testing on-site and/or help with testing logistics and communication.

We also strongly support the state’s commitment to helping districts establish and host vaccination sites in schools, so that students, families, and staff have easy and convenient access to life-saving vaccines. Again, the cost of running these sites should be free to districts, and it appears the state is also making that commitment, which we applaud. If there are ways our union can partner with your Administration to facilitate these clinics, we would be happy to do so.

We have some remaining questions relating to the guidance that we would like to explore further with DESE and DPH:

- The guidance says that “masks may be removed while eating indoors.” While it’s obvious that students must remove their masks to eat, we also know that close physical contact in

indoor spaces (such as cafeterias) without masks is a prime driver of the virus. Will DESE be issuing follow-up guidance on how districts can make breakfast and lunch in schools as safe as possible (e.g., staggered eating schedules, physical distancing, eating outside when possible, ventilation and cleaning protocols, etc.), or will this be left to districts to figure out for themselves?

- The guidance says that “vaccinated staff and students are exempt from quarantine” if they come in close contact with known COVID-positive individuals. How does your Administration reconcile this policy with emerging evidence showing that even vaccinated people can acquire the virus, carry heavy virus loads, and transmit the virus to vaccinated and unvaccinated people alike?
- The guidance is silent on a key mitigation measure for controlling the virus: air quality and HVAC systems. We would like to hold a meeting with DESE Commissioner Jeff Riley and key DESE officials to discuss the establishment of a system of standards and accountability for HVAC systems in school districts. This would include accountability for how HVAC systems are installed and maintained in accordance with a regular servicing schedule. It could also include state resources for necessary HVAC upgrades.

In closing, we all share the goal of keeping schools open this year for safe and productive in-person learning. Accomplishing that goal will require a multi-faceted, layered approach that includes a statewide universal masking mandate; free and accessible vaccinations; free and accessible COVID testing; air quality and HVAC improvements; smart and effective quarantining policies; and the continued implementation of hygiene protocols, such as frequent hand washing. Your Administration’s guidance gets some aspects right but falls short in other areas, most notably when it comes to masking. We look forward to working with your Administration and DESE to correct these missteps so that all students can benefit from safe and productive in-person learning this school year.

Sincerely,



Beth Kontos
President, AFT Massachusetts

cc: James Peyser, Secretary of Education
Jeff Riley, Education Commissioner