



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH

Senate Education Committee on the Impacts of PA Department of Health Orders on  
Pennsylvania's Children and Schools.

Testimony of  
Alison Beam  
Acting Secretary, Pennsylvania Department of Health

Good morning Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Williams, and members of the Senate Education Committee. I am Alison Beam, Acting Secretary of the Department of Health. Due to pending litigation instituted by members of the General Assembly and some families, I am only presenting written remarks to the committee regarding information on the Order for Face Coverings in Schools. These remarks provide the Committee and the public with the rationale for this order and explain why masking is essential to preserve ongoing, in-person education in Pennsylvania.

As you recall, during my appearance before the Committee on August 6<sup>th</sup>, I strongly echoed the Wolf Administration's commitment to the preservation of ongoing, in-person instruction in Pennsylvania schools. We know that in-person learning is critical for the health and wellbeing of students, especially after a tumultuous year of virtual or hybrid learning. In-person learning is what is best for our students and it also benefits Pennsylvania, as it allows parents to continue to work. Unfortunately, COVID-19 cases have begun to rise due to newer, highly-transmissible variants. For context, on August 6<sup>th</sup>, the Department reported 1,691 new COVID-19 cases. This summer's troubling trend has continued through the start of the school year. Now, more than 4,000 new daily cases are being reported on a regular basis.

In addition to this, we also noted concerning trends in southern states where pediatric beds and pediatric ICU beds were full in areas with low vaccination rates and either no or optional mask policies in schools. Equally troubling in those same areas of the country, were school closures due to mass amounts of students quarantining or isolating due to either having the virus or being identified as a close contact. If students are appropriately masked and distanced, those layered strategies limit the number of students identified as close contacts, who are required to quarantine, which results in removing them from the classroom and in-person learning. The masking order promotes in-person learning and limits those harmful impacts.

Further, some local conditions created less than ideal circumstances for students to safely return to the classroom. We know that while statewide our vaccination rate is high, our vaccination rate in some areas of Pennsylvania is low – near 30% fully vaccinated for some counties. This provides those communities at-large lower protection and higher risk for those under 12-years



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH

old who are not yet able to be vaccinated. In fact, the number of COVID-19 cases among school-aged children (between 5-18 years old) is exponentially greater this year than in 2020. Between September 8 and September 14, 2020, there were a total of 630 COVID-19 cases in school-aged children compared to 7,218 cases in the same age group during the same week in 2021.

Finally, we also saw a reluctance of many school leaders to act, administering optional masking policies with broad opt-outs that would allow the virus to run rampant in our schools. Looking at all of these facts, along with the fact that only 59 of the 474 school districts were requiring masks, we knew that instituting the masking order was necessary to preserve in-person education in our schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer remarks for the committee.