

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

January 31, 2022

Dr. Rochelle Walensky  
Director  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
395 E Street S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Dr. Walensky:

We write to inquire into the scientific bases for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) guidelines for children throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. The CDC has consistently failed to consider the crushing impact its COVID-19 policies have had on our nation's children. We have long known transmission among children is low and symptoms are mild for most of them. Yet, the CDC has refused to follow the science. Rather, it has blindly tried to prevent infection at all costs—sacrificing our children's mental, physical, and emotional health. Republicans on the Committee have been sounding the alarm on the negative impacts these policies are having on our children for nearly two years. America's children are paying—and will continue to pay—the price for the CDC's decisions for years to come.

## **I. School guidance failures**

The current CDC guidance recommends quarantining any student who was in close contact with someone who tests positive for COVID-19. This can lead to weeks long disruptions for entire classrooms creating instability for students and childcare chaos for working parents. There are major health, social, developmental, and educational risks to keeping children home from school. Schools are a vital point of contact for public health services: mental health support, special therapies, free school meals, physical activity, early developmental skills, and sighting signs of child abuse at home.<sup>1</sup> Vaccines are available for anyone over five years of age and Congress allocated \$190 billion to reopen schools safely.<sup>2</sup> No student should be forced to learn virtually.

Student learning loss due to remote or hybrid learning is astronomical—failing grades are rising.<sup>3</sup> Among third through eighth graders, math and reading levels were all lower than normal

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<sup>1</sup> *COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry*, AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS (June 25, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Annie Waldman & Bianca Fortis, *The Federal Government Gave Billions to America's Schools for COVID-19 Relief. Where Did the Money Go?*, PROPUBLICA (Oct. 20, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Goldberg, *Democrats Desperately need Schools to Get Back to Normal*, THE N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 11, 2021).

this fall.<sup>4</sup> The gaps were largest for Black and Hispanic students, and schools with high poverty rates.<sup>5</sup>

On January 21, 2021, President Biden issued Executive Order 14000 stating, “it is the policy of [my] Administration to provide support...for safe, in-person learning as quickly as possible.”<sup>6</sup> On January 4, 2022, President Biden stated, “[w]e know that our kids can be safe when in school...That’s why I believe schools should remain open. They have what they need.”<sup>7</sup> On January 5, 2022, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki echoed the Biden Administration’s commitment to maintain in-person learning stating, “we want schools to be open, the President wants them to be open and we’re going to continue to use every resource and work to ensure that’s the case.”<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, many teachers unions are actively undermining in-person education, and the Biden Administration has failed to follow through on their empty rhetoric with actions to stand up to the union bosses in support of our nation’s children.

Some teachers unions have repeatedly jeopardized America’s children’s education and livelihoods throughout this pandemic. Even as teachers were prioritized for vaccines, many refused to return to in-person instruction.<sup>9</sup> Even worse, classes for Chicago Public Schools were abruptly cancelled on Wednesday January 5, 2022, after the Chicago Teachers Union voted to cancel in-person learning and refused to show up to work, despite no scientific basis for their decision.<sup>10</sup> Dr. Leana Wen, a professor of public health at George Washington University, said, “schools remain one of the safest places for children from a #covid19 transmission standpoint.”<sup>11</sup> Teachers and students are more likely to be infected at social gatherings and restaurants than at school.<sup>12</sup>

Under the CDC’s guidance for early education and childcare centers, the current recommendation is that if an unvaccinated child is exposed to a COVID positive classmate, they should isolate and quarantine for 14 days.<sup>13</sup> This means that if one child in a preschool classroom (where the children are below the vaccination age) tests positive, the entire class must shut down for 14 days. These isolation policies are ineffective, especially in light of the transmission and infection rate for this age group. The CDC’s guidelines make it impossible for parents to maintain any regular work schedule or find childcare on short notice. This uncertainty is a logistical nightmare for parents and creates further disruption for children.

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<sup>4</sup> David Leonhardt, *No Way to Grow Up*, THE N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 4, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Exec. Order No. 14000, 86 F.R. 7215 (Jan. 26, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Morgan Chalfant, *Biden: Schools should stay open despite omicron wave*, THE HILL (Jan. 5, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Nick Niedzwiadek, *Psaki: Schools can open safely 'including in Chicago'*, POLITICO (Jan. 5, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> *Joe Biden sacrifices children to the teachers unions*, THE WASH. EXAMINER (Jan. 28, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Tracy Swartz, *et.al.*, *CPS classes canceled Wednesday after Chicago Teachers Union votes to refuse in-person schooling*, CHICAGO TRIBUNE (Jan. 4, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Leana Wen, M.D. (@DrLeanaWen), Twitter (Jan. 4, 2022, 10:22 p.m.), <https://twitter.com/drleanawen/status/1478567571771305990>.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, *Frequently Asked Questions for Parents and Caregivers about COVID-19 Precautions in Schools* (last updated Dec. 17, 2021).

## II. Masking young children against scientific evidence

Current CDC guidance states that children over the age of two, whether vaccinated or not, should wear masks in school and other indoor settings.<sup>14</sup> The extent of the protection masks provide, particularly in schools, remains unknown—and it might be very small.<sup>15</sup> The CDC continues to rely on and cite to a flawed study from Arizona, which the CDC published in its Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, to defend masking children in schools.<sup>16</sup> This study did not control for days students actually spent in the classroom, improved ventilation, vaccination status or other mitigation measures.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the schools without mask mandates were in session for more days during the data collection than those who had mask mandates—nearly doubling the in-person time for students in schools without mask mandates.<sup>18</sup> The Arizona study data does not paint an accurate picture of mask effectiveness for children in school.

Further, other studies relied upon by the CDC do not show that masks, on their own, provide any additional protection to children.<sup>19</sup> Several experts note it is entirely possible that open windows or increased ventilation accounts for nearly all the mitigation benefit in a classroom and other “layered” interventions may contribute only a marginal benefit or none at all.<sup>20</sup>

We have evidence of significant problems with requiring young children to wear masks all day. Practically speaking, children who need glasses have difficulty seeing when the mask fogs their lenses, masks cause severe acne and other skin problems, and they can be a distraction for children trying to learn.<sup>21</sup> More importantly, studies show that reading lips is a crucial part of language development for children starting around 8 months of age—even more so for bilingual children.<sup>22</sup> Studies show 4- to 6-year-old bilingual children lip-read more when they are confronted with speech in an unfamiliar language.<sup>23</sup> Masking these children in school where they may be learning in their secondary language creates additional barriers to learning.

Further, “[r]eading faces is critical for social emotional learning.”<sup>24</sup> Facial expressions are integral to human connection and social learning, particularly for young children, who are just starting to learn how to signal fear, confusion, happiness or other emotions.<sup>25</sup> Covering a child’s face mutes these nonverbal forms of communication and can result in robotic and

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<sup>14</sup> *K-12 Schools*, CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION (last visited Jan. 12, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> David Zweig, *The CDC’s Flawed Case for Wearing Masks in School*, THE ATLANTIC (Dec. 16, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> David Zweig, *The Science of Masking Kids at School Remains Uncertain*, N.Y. MAG. (Aug. 20, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> Marty Makary & H. Cody Meissner, *The Case Against Masks for Children*, THE WALL ST. J. (Aug. 8, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> David J. Lewkowicz, *Masks Can Be Detrimental to Babies’ Speech and Language Development*, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN (Feb. 11, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> David Zweig, *The Science of Masking Kids at School Remains Uncertain*, N.Y. MAG. (Aug. 20, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Marty Makary & H. Cody Meissner, *The Case Against Masks for Children*, THE WALL ST. J. (Aug. 8, 2021).

emotionless interactions, anxiety, and depression.<sup>26</sup> According to Dr. Lucy McBride, a well-respected Washington, D.C. physician, children “need to see faces to develop emotionally and socially at those ages” yet it appears the CDC has failed to consider the adverse consequences when masking young children.<sup>27</sup>

Worldwide, countries have forgone mask mandates in schools due to the adverse consequences for children. For instance, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control recommends against primary school children wearing masks.<sup>28</sup> The World Health Organization says no one under 6 years of age should wear a mask.<sup>29</sup> Many of America’s peer nations around the world—including the U.K., Ireland, all of Scandinavia, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Italy—have exempted children, with varying age cutoffs, from wearing masks in classrooms with *no evidence of an uptick in school outbreaks in those countries relative to schools in the U.S.*<sup>30</sup>

### III. CDC’s failure to account for harm to children

Evidence shows that the Omicron variant is not more severe for children.<sup>31</sup> Preliminary data suggests that compared with the Delta variant, Omicron appears to be causing milder illness in children, similar to adults.<sup>32</sup> Much of the rise in recent pediatric admissions results from the sheer number of children who are becoming infected.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the hospitalization rate for vaccinated school-aged kids, during the peak of the Omicron surge in New York is just 2 to 3 per million.<sup>34</sup>

There have been 841 deaths related to COVID-19 for Americans under the age of 18 since the pandemic began. While each death is tragic, all of America’s children are suffering mentally, physically, and emotionally due to the circumstances we are placing them in under false hope of completely preventing COVID-19.

For instance, nearly 2,000 Americans under 18 years of age died from child abuse and neglect in 2019—about five deaths per day.<sup>35</sup> These numbers are likely higher now as children are shuttered in with their abusers; with no other adults around they can reach out to for help since schoolteachers and counselors are not able to look for and report signs of abuse.

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<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> Dr. Drew, *The Mental Health Impact of Masking & Quarantining Children: Dr. Lucy McBride on Ask Dr. Drew*, YOUTUBE (Nov. 23, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> *Questions and answers on COVID-19: Children aged 1 – 18 years and the role of school settings*, EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR DISEASE PREVENTION & CONTROL (last visited Nov. 11, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> David Zweig, *The Science of Masking Kids at School Remains Uncertain*, N.Y. MAG. (Aug. 20, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Jacobs, *Omicron is not more severe for children, despite rising hospitalizations*, THE N.Y. TIMES (Dec. 28, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Allen (@j\_g\_allen), Twitter (Jan. 9, 2022), [https://twitter.com/j\\_g\\_allen/status/1480268557116182539](https://twitter.com/j_g_allen/status/1480268557116182539).

<sup>35</sup> *Child Maltreatment Statistics*, AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR THE POSITIVE CARE OF CHILDREN (last visited Jan. 13, 2022).

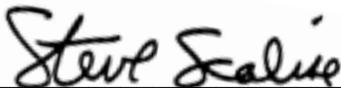
Children and teenagers are experiencing a mental health crisis of historic proportions—the U.S. Surgeon General has issued a warning and the American Academy of Pediatrics declared a national state of emergency in children’s mental health.<sup>36</sup> Suicide attempts have risen sharply for adolescents with suicide attempts by 12- to 17-year-old girls rising 51 percent from early 2019 to early 2021.<sup>37</sup> Early estimates show there were more than 6,600 suicide deaths in 2020 among youth age 10-24 in the U.S.<sup>38</sup> Historically, the suicide rate for black children is twice that of white children.<sup>39</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

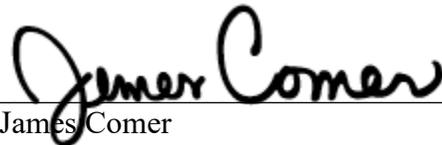
There is no question, as we enter the third year of this pandemic, CDC’s guidelines and policies have failed to factor in—let alone prioritize—children’s social, emotional, and educational development.<sup>40</sup> In fact, CDC is undermining its own credibility as it continues to jeopardize an entire generation’s development. In order to better understand the CDC’s decisions regarding America’s children, please schedule a staff briefing on all of the above topics no later than February 7, 2022.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. Further, the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis is empowered to investigate “preparedness for and response to the coronavirus crisis, including the planning for and implementation of testing, containment, mitigation, and surveillance activities.”<sup>41</sup> Thank you in advance for your cooperation with this inquiry.

Sincerely,



Steve J. Scalise  
Ranking Member  
Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis



James Comer  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight and Reform

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<sup>36</sup> *Id.*; See also Press Release, U.S. Surgeon General Issues Advisory on Youth Mental Health Crisis Further Exposed by COVID-19 Pandemic, U.S. Dep’t of Health & Human Servs. (Dec. 7, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> Face the Nation (@FaceTheNation) Twitter (Dec. 26, 2021), <https://twitter.com/FaceTheNation/status/1475209878415323140>.

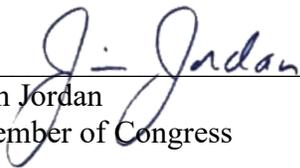
<sup>40</sup> Joseph G. Allen, *We Learned Our Lesson Last Year: Do Not Close Schools*, THE N.Y. TIMES (Dec. 20, 2021).

<sup>41</sup> H. Res. 935 § 3(a)(4) (2020).

Dr. Rochelle Walensky

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cc: The Honorable James E. Clyburn, Chairman  
Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis

The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney, Chairwoman  
Committee on Oversight and Reform