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CDC School Mask Guidelines Roil Parents

By Ben DeGrow

Summary

The state government ought to diffuse controversies over school masking policies by encouraging parental choice in education.

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The hopes of many Michigan parents for a normal return to school took a blow recently from the nation's public health officials. The latest announcement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention could escalate local tensions and the need for more education options, even though some districts have taken a different policy stance from the CDC.

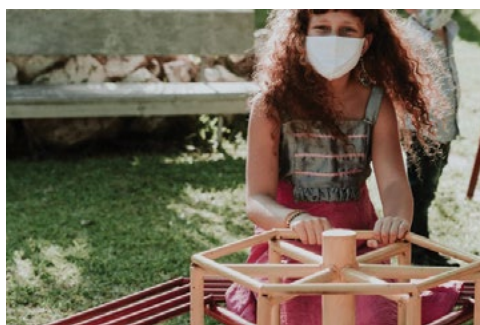
In response to increasing cases of COVID caused by the delta variant, the CDC has called for universal masking in schools, regardless of a student or staff member's vaccination status. The declaration does not represent a binding policy requirement, but it does add weight behind those who support full-scale continuation of pandemic protocols.

The nation's two largest teachers unions quickly offered their support for the public health guidelines. The National Education Association affirmed that "schools should be consistently and rigorously employing all the CDC-recommended mitigation strategies."

More explicitly, the American Federation of Teachers asserted that, until more children are inoculated against COVID-19, "Wearing masks inside schools regardless of vaccine status is required to deal with the changing realities of virus transmission." Earlier this year, the union was caught using its influence to shape CDC guidance with an eye toward delaying a full reopening of schools.

It's safe to say the unions' positions are far from universally popular with Michigan parents. At least in some places, local officials appear to be hearing and responding to their concerns. The 10,000-member grassroots group Michigan Save Our Kids Open Our Schools has collected accounts of dozens of districts across the state that have publicly resisted requirements for student mask-wearing or COVID testing.

Most of the skirmishes over masks and vaccines will be played out at the district level, as state officials are taking a hands-off approach. In response to the new CDC directive, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer backed away from her earlier approach of requiring face coverings as part of a pandemic response. "I do not anticipate another pandemic order, not in the near future and maybe not ever," she said. Her state health department recently recommended mask-wearing at schools but stopped short of issuing a mandate.



The CDC has said students and teachers alike should wear masks in school.

Rather than take these proclamations for granted, some Republican state lawmakers have planted a flag on the issue. Senate bills 600 through 603 would preempt local requirements for children to wear masks or receive the COVID vaccine in order to attend school.

There may be some merit to these proposals. But Lansing legislators would do better to rally behind funding students and giving families greater flexibility, especially where districts create and enforce unworkable arrangements. Last year, some districts were slow to announce their pandemic plans, leaving many parents with no time to apply to transfer to nearby districts. Those who could afford tuition turned to private schools, which distinguished themselves in providing safe in-person instruction.

There is no need to repeat the frustrations of 2020. The K-12 system is awash in record funding. Families shouldn't have to struggle to find the means to provide the type of education desired for their children. Parents need more choices at every level.

Where districts can't or won't provide suitable learning conditions, families upset by mask policies and other local decisions should explore their options. And the state should focus on giving all students greater access to schools that work for them.

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