

Answers to FAQs

Masking in Schools, Early Learning, and Child Care Facilities: Frequently Asked Questions

Which school entities are subject to the Acting Secretary of Health's Order?

The Order applies to all children/students, teachers, staff, and visitors ages two years or older while indoors working, attending, or visiting a school entity, regardless of vaccination status. School entities include public PreK-12 schools, brick and mortar and cyber charter schools, private and parochial schools, career and technical centers (CTCs), intermediate units (IUs), PA Pre-K Counts programs, Head Start Programs, Family Centers, Preschool Early Intervention programs, Private Academic Nursery Schools and locally funded prekindergarten activities, and all child care providers licensed by the Department of Human Services of the Commonwealth.

How long will masks be required in school entities?

The Order is effective 12:01 AM on Tuesday, September 7, 2021, and will remain in effect until the Acting Secretary of Health determines the public health risk is sufficiently reduced so that face coverings are no longer necessary as public health tools in school entities. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and the Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) will continue to provide updates as they continue to closely monitor the CDC guidance.

Is there evidence that masks are effective?

Yes. Recent studies have shown that mask-wearing in schools has contributed to lower levels of COVID-19 transmission among students and staff and allowed for continued in-person attendance. Further, research supports that mask wearing has no significant adverse health effects for wearers. More information on the effectiveness of mask wearing, including published research, can be found on the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) website Opens In A New Window](#).

Are public PK-12 schools required to incorporate this new masking policy into the Health and Safety Plans approved by their governing bodies?

Although PDE recommends public school entities update their local American Rescue Plan (ARP) Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Health and Safety Plans to reflect the Acting Secretary of Health's August 31, 2021 Order, they are not required to do so. Regardless of whether the Acting Secretary's August 31, 2021 Order is reflected in a school entity's Health and Safety Plan, all school entities must comply with and enforce the Order. For awareness in their school communities, school entities may find it useful to post a link to the Order on their websites.

Are there exceptions to the Acting Secretary of Health's Order?

All individuals must wear a face covering while in school entities unless they meet one of the exceptions in [Section 3 of the Order](#).

Are individuals required to show proof of an exception to the Order?

Notwithstanding the exceptions in [Section 3 of the Order](#), school entities may require medical documentation. PDE recommends that any documentation that is provided be in accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act or IDEA for the student's medical or mental health condition or disability.

Under what circumstances are students permitted to remove their face coverings?

All children/students **ages two years or older** must wear a face covering indoors unless they meet an exception in [Section 3 of the Order](#), such as eating or drinking or when wearing a face covering creates an unsafe condition in which to operate equipment or execute a task. Wearing a face covering for an extended period may be difficult for some students, especially for younger students. School entities may consider providing "mask breaks" for students during outdoor play, recess, or physical education activities.

When face coverings are not being worn in accordance with Section 3 of the Order, utilizing additional prevention strategies, such as physical distancing and increased ventilation, become even more essential to protect children/students, teachers, and staff.

What should a school entity do when an individual, who does not meet the allowable exceptions, refuses to wear a mask?

This is a legal Order under the Disease Prevention and Control Law. School entities are expected to enforce the Order as they do other state laws. Reasonable steps may include developing and implementing a policy, training staff on conflict management, and monitoring and taking corrective actions in instances of noncompliance among staff, students, customers, or visitors.

School entities should not enforce face covering requirements when there is an exception under Section 3 of the Order or if it is unsafe to do so; and should not restrain, use force, or physically remove teachers, children/students, staff, or visitors who refuse to comply with this Order when it would not otherwise be legal to do so. Schools may not violate any other laws, including state and federal anti-discrimination laws, in implementation of the Order.

What are the potential consequences if a school entity fails to comply with the Order?

Failure to implement and follow the control measures under the Order subjects a person to the penalty provisions of the Disease Prevention and Control Law of 1955. Failing to implement or follow the control measures may also expose individuals to personal liability under 42 Pa.C.S § 8550 (relating to willful misconduct), as well as other remedies as provided by law.

Non-compliance with the Order for child care providers licensed by the Department of Human Services will be cited under 55 Pa. Code §3270.14, §3280.14 (relating to compliance with pertinent laws and regulations) as well as 55 Pa. Code §3270.21, §3280.20, and §3290.18 (relating to general health and safety).

What type of mask complies with this Order?

The Order requires individuals to wear a "face covering." "Face covering" means covering of the nose and mouth with material that is secured to the head with ties, straps, or loops over the ears or is wrapped around the lower face. A "face covering" can be made of a variety of synthetic or natural fabrics, including cotton, silk or linen. A "face covering" may be factory-made, [sewn by hand, or be improvised from household items](#)[Opens In A New Window](#), including, but not limited to, scarfs, bandanas, t-shirts, sweatshirts, or towels.

Does a disposable face shield suffice in lieu of a mask?

Wearing a cloth face covering is best. A disposable face shield is considered an alternative to a face covering and may be worn when wearing a face covering, as defined above, is otherwise not possible.

Are vaccinated individuals required to wear masks in schools?

Yes. Due to the circulating and highly contagious Delta variant, the Order applies to all children/students ages two years or older, staff, teachers, and visitors when indoors in school entities, regardless of vaccination status and community transmission level.

Are individuals covered by this Order required to wear a mask outdoors?

No. The Order does not require face coverings when outdoors. Individuals should follow the most [current guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)[Opens In A New Window](#) on mask use outdoors.

Do groups using the school after hours have to follow the face mask order?

Yes. The Order applies to all activities occurring indoors in the school entity, regardless of when the activity occurs.

Do staff and children in child care and other early learning settings need to wear face coverings?

All staff and children ages two years or older, regardless of vaccination status, must wear face coverings during child care operations unless they meet one of the exceptions in [Section 3 of the Order](#).