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Wolf Administration Requires Masking in Schools, Early Learning and Child Care Settings to Keep Students Safely in Classrooms and Delta Variant Out

Harrisburg, PA – With a focus on protecting students and keeping them in classrooms, Governor Tom Wolf joined the departments of Health, Human Services and Education today to discuss the current state of COVID-19 and a new Secretary of Health order requiring masks to be worn inside K-12 school buildings, early learning programs and child care providers. The [order](#) takes effect 12:01 a.m. Tuesday, Sept. 7, 2021.

“My office has received an outpouring of messages from parents asking the administration to protect all children by requiring masks in schools,” said Gov. Wolf. “The science is clear. The Delta variant is highly transmissible and dangerous to the unvaccinated, many of whom are children too young to receive the vaccine. Requiring masks in schools will keep our students safer and in the classroom, where we all want them to be.

“I preferred for local school boards to make this decision. Unfortunately, an aggressive nationwide campaign is spreading misinformation about mask-wearing and pressuring and intimidating school districts to reject mask policies that will keep kids safe and in school. As we see cases among children increase in Pennsylvania and throughout the country, this is especially dangerous and challenging as we seek to keep kids in school and maintain a safe and healthy learning environment.”

Acting Health Secretary Alison Beam was joined at a press conference today by Governor Tom Wolf, Education Secretary Noe Ortega, Human Services Acting Secretary Meg Snead and President of the Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics Dr. Trude Haecker.

“The reality we are living in now is much different than it was just a month ago,” said Acting Health Secretary Alison Beam. “With case counts increasing, the situation has reached the point that we need to take this action to protect our children, teachers and staff. The science is clear. If we want to keep our schools open, maintain classroom learning and allow sports and other activities to continue, masking significantly increases our chances of doing so.”

Universal masking in schools, which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend, reduces the risk that entire classrooms will need to quarantine due to a positive COVID-19 case. This order ensures Pennsylvania's children are participating in classroom learning without the constant disruptions.

The Delta variant has been a driving force of the pandemic since the end of the previous school year. The variant is more contagious than the original strain of the virus, accounting for more than 92 percent of current COVID-19 cases in Pennsylvania. Since July when schools first began discussing health and safety plans, Pennsylvania's COVID-19 caseload has increased from less than 300 a day to more than 3,000 a day – with cases among school aged children increasing by more than 11,000 in the last month, and by more than 79,000 from January 2021 to August 2021.

Additionally, new cases of COVID-19 among children enrolled in licensed child care facilities have increased significantly in recent months, according to data reported to DHS by child care providers. For example, on June 4, child care providers reported eight cases of COVID-19 among children in the previous week. On August 27, the number of new COVID-19 cases among children in child care the previous week was 162.

The Wolf Administration continues to urge eligible Pennsylvanians to get vaccinated, as it is the best defense at stopping the spread of the virus. However, there is currently no vaccine approved for children under 12 years old. For eligible adolescents in Pennsylvania, 18.2 percent of children ages 12-14 are fully vaccinated and 38.3 percent of children ages 15-19 are fully vaccinated.

"After months apart, students and educators are eagerly returning to classrooms across Pennsylvania for the new school year," said Secretary of Education Noe Ortega. "Unfortunately, we've already seen schools across the nation close because of COVID-19. Wearing masks is a proven strategy that will help Pennsylvania's schools reduce the spread of COVID-19, protect their communities, and keep our students and educators where we know it's vital for them to be – teaching, learning and growing together safely in their classrooms."

"An early childhood education experience can shape a child's educational, social and emotional development throughout their lives. Science has shown us that the first five years of life are critical to brain development, influencing the trajectory of an individual's life for many years after," DHS Acting Secretary Meg Snead said. "A thriving child care industry is also foundational to the rest of our economy, and this industry and the dedicated educators who show up every day to help our children grow will be essential for our recovery from this pandemic. Simply put, without access to safe child care and early learning programs, many parents cannot work."

Acting Secretary Beam signed the order under her authority provided by the Disease Prevention and Control Law.

The Order applies to everyone indoors at K-12 public schools including brick and mortar and cyber charter schools, private and parochial schools, career and technical centers (CTCs), and intermediate units (IUs). The order also applies to early learning programs and child care providers for children ages 2 and older, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The order outlines the situations when a mask must be worn and includes limited exceptions to the face-covering requirement. The order does not apply to school sports or outdoor activities.

Failure to implement or follow the Order may subject a person to penalties under the Disease Prevention and Control Law of 1955 and exposure to personal liability.

Last week, the governor sent a letter asking Republican legislative leaders to immediately collaborate with him to pass legislation requiring mask wearing in schools and at child care facilities. Because the Republican leaders declined to act, the acting secretary is taking action to help keep students in classrooms, which is the best place for them to learn.

The departments also provided an initial series of [answers to frequently asked questions about the Secretary of Health's masking order](#).

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