

Masks in Schools During COVID-19

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Can my child be excluded from school if s/he can't wear a mask all day due to his/her disability? Will s/he have to go 100% virtually?

Probably not – children should not be excluded from school solely based on their inability to wear a mask due to their disability, unless a local health order prohibits going out in public without a mask. Most of the local health orders have exceptions for people with disabilities, however, so this scenario is unlikely.

School districts should make reasonable modifications in their policies, practices, or procedures to accommodate students who cannot wear a mask due to their disability. These modifications must be consistent with the health, safety, and well-being of all students and staff, but they are necessary to avoid discrimination on the basis of disability.

2. What are some safe alternatives to wearing a mask in school?

- Buttons that allow for putting the facial covering straps on a headband or cap, instead of around the ears.
- Face shields.
- Plexiglass barriers.
- Additional space.
- Additional Personal Protective Equipment for staff.
- Arranging desks and learning spaces to prevent overlap.
- Smaller cohorts.
- More of all of the safety protections already in place, such as handwashing, disinfection, etc.
- “In home” only for certain high-risk activities, like PE and choir.
- A face shield with a cloth drape.

3. What should I do if I'm worried about my child keeping a mask on in school?

School staff and parents should provide explicit instruction to the child on wearing a facial covering or shield and give chances for him/ her to practice.

If you're worried about your child keeping a mask on in school, you may want to call an IEP team meeting to discuss the matter. As the parent, you can call for an IEP team meeting anytime and the school must schedule one within a reasonable amount of time. Decisions about supports that may be needed for individual students with IEPs should be made through an IEP team meeting or by using the I-10 form. The I-10 form is a Notice of Changes to an IEP Without an IEP Team Meeting, which can be appropriate when the team agrees on changes to be made to the IEP without a formal meeting. The IEP team should consider a positive Behavior Intervention Plan to include mask tolerance strategies.

Whatever reasonable accommodations that the team decides on should be documented in the student's IEP or 504 plan.

4. Does my school have to accommodate my child if s/he cannot wear a mask?

Yes, as long as the school complies with local health orders. (See Answer #1).

There are many people who may not be able to wear masks, for a variety of reasons. Medical considerations, including autism spectrum disorder and respiratory conditions, as well as traumatic personal experiences, mean that some people can't wear a face covering safely. Wearing a cloth face covering may be dangerous or stressful for people with disabilities and young children. Individuals may also not be able to wear a face covering safely due to racial profiling or discrimination. Access to clean, appropriate, or multiple face coverings may also be a barrier.

No child's placement can be made more restrictive due solely to their inability to wear a face covering or face shield.

5. Is my child required to bring in a doctor's note to excuse him/her from wearing a mask?

No doctor's note is required, but it is still a good idea to consult with your child's doctor on this issue. It's also advisable to document the fact that s/he cannot wear a mask in the IEP or 504 plan.

6. Can my child take breaks at school from wearing a mask?

Yes. Schools should schedule “mask breaks” outside of meal breaks for students. Students and faculty should be socially distanced in a space with adequate ventilation during mask breaks.

7. Where can I find more information regarding the law and mask requirements?

Considerations in Using Facial Coverings When Supporting Students during In-Person Instruction (DPI)

Speaks to various implications of face coverings for both staff and students, primarily aimed at disability-related situations. Includes a list of additional links.

<https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sped/pdf/covid-facial-coverings-considerations.pdf>

Cloth Face Coverings in Schools – What Families Need to Know (DHS/DPI)

This document provides info on how to effectively use and clean cloth face coverings. Also talks about having conversations with your kids about why some children might not be wearing cloth face coverings (disabilities, medical issues, etc.)

https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sspw/pdf/What_Families_Need_to_Know-Cloth_Facial_Coverings_in_Schools.pdf

Education Forward: Operating Schools During a Pandemic (DPI)

Infection Control & Mitigation:

“School districts are encouraged to have thoughtful discussions with school nurses, other school health professionals, teaching and support staff, and parents regarding use of masks by students and PPE use by staff who work closely with students who are unable to control secretions or present other concerns for effectiveness or safety of masking.”

Special Education:

“Plan to accommodate students for whom traditional use of personal protective equipment (PPE) or other face coverings, social distancing, and hygiene techniques may not be feasible....” (examples etc.)

<https://dpi.wi.gov/education-forward>

PPE Considerations for Schools (DPI)

In tabular form, for staff. Covers the student situation of needing a nebulizer treatment.

https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sspw/pdf/PPE_Considerations_for_Schools.pdf

Guidelines for the Prevention, Investigation, and Control of COVID-19 Outbreaks in K-12 Schools in Wisconsin (DHS)

Includes description of students who cannot wear masks safely: “there are valid concerns that may prevent an individual from wearing one safely. Cloth face coverings should NOT be placed on children under age 2, anyone who has trouble breathing or is unconscious, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to remove the covering without assistance. Medical considerations, including sensory concerns and respiratory conditions, mean some individuals are not able to wear a face covering safely. Wearing a cloth face covering may be dangerous or stressful for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities.”

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02757.pdf>

Interim COVID-19 Infection Control and Mitigation Measures for Schools (DPI)

Includes recommendation about “mask breaks” for students.

https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sspw/pdf/Interim_COVID-19_Infection_Control_and_Mitigation_Measures_for_Schools.pdf

Feasibility and Adaptations (CDC)

Wearing masks may not be possible in every situation or for every person. Wearing a mask may exacerbate a physical or mental health condition, lead to a medical emergency, or introduce safety concerns. Adaptations and alternatives should be considered whenever possible to increase the feasibility of wearing a mask or to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading if it’s not possible to wear a mask.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-guidance.html#feasibility-adaptations>

Questions and Answers for K-12 Public Schools in the Current COVID-19 Environment
(U.S. Dept. of Ed., Office of Civil Rights)

When a child with a disability has extreme sensory issues and cannot tolerate wearing a face covering in school, enforcing a face covering requirement could impede the child's ability to receive FAPE. School districts should make reasonable modifications in their policies, practices, or procedures—including any addressing the use of face coverings—when those modifications can be made consistent with the health, safety, and well-being of all students and staff, and are necessary to avoid discrimination based on disability.

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/qa-covid-20200928.pdf>

“District Administration” Newsletter: 5 Safety Measures to Implement for Students Who Can't Wear Masks

<https://districtadministration.com/5-safety-measures-to-implement-for-students-who-cant-wear-masks/>