

To our partners in education,

We have become aware of a small but concerning push to report masking requirements for children in schools to the child abuse reporting system. Since Sept. 1, the Department of Human Services' (DHS) ChildLine has received approximately 50 reports mentioning masking. Comparatively, there are approximately 1.7 million public school students in Pennsylvania. While reports that would incorrectly equate wearing a mask to child abuse currently represent a small portion of overall reports received by ChildLine, this is nevertheless an inappropriate and unnecessary distraction for both educators and child welfare professionals.

DHS' Office of Children, Youth, and Families has received requests for confirmation that masking, in line with guidelines from health officials, is not a form of child abuse. While Pennsylvania's Child Protective Services Law describes obstructing a child's breathing as child abuse, **mask wearing for children 2 and older does not obstruct breathing and is not child abuse**. Research overwhelmingly shows that mask-wearing doesn't limit breathing or oxygen levels.¹ Additionally, the American Academy of Pediatrics has reinforced the safety of masks for children², especially those who cannot yet get vaccinated, and the organization has also recommended that all school staff and children over 2 wear masks to allow for safer in-person learning.³

Reports that falsely conflate an evidence-based public health measure designed to protect children, school personnel, and our entire communities against a deadly and highly contagious virus to child abuse is insulting and disrespectful to survivors of child abuse. Too many children and families are affected by child abuse every day, and school staff, as mandated reporters, work diligently every day to be aware of signs of potential abuse and neglect. School staff are important partners of the broad child protective services system, and child welfare agencies rely on your expertise and your observations of children to understand when a family may need assistance or intervention.

Likening this life-saving measure to child abuse is a disrespectful misrepresentation that can tie up already limited resources. While we encourage all Pennsylvanians to report concerns about a child's well-being to ChildLine, bad-faith reports of neglect or abuse expend the time and resources of child welfare workers at the state and county level, further endangering both children and adults in the midst of a public-health crisis. We at the state level appreciate your support and partnership in this work always, and we stand with you through this time of heightened tension.

Masks can keep both children and those around them safe. Since the start of the school year, reports of quarantined classrooms and closed schools due to outbreaks of COVID-19 have been heard around the country, particularly in states that have attempted to block local mask requirements. Schools in these states are continuing to lose time and, in some cases, lives. School staff and educators deserve to work in an environment and free from avoidable disruption. Our children have endured significant change and disruption since the start of the pandemic. They deserve a school year with in-person education, sports,

¹ David G. Hill, M.D., American Lung Association <https://www.lung.org/blog/covid-masks>

² Kimberly M. Dickinson, MD, MPH & Theresa W. Guilbert, MD, MS, FAAP, American Academy of Pediatrics <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Mask-Mythbusters.aspx>

³ American Academy of Pediatrics <https://www.aap.org/en/news-room/news-releases/aap/2021/american-academy-of-pediatrics-updates-recommendations-for-opening-schools-in-fall-2021/>



and activities, and as much normalcy as we can create through a changing environment. Masking will help make that possible, so thank you for what you are doing to promote safety in your schools.

On behalf of Governor Wolf and the Wolf Administration, we want to thank each of you for your leadership and steadfast commitment to protecting your students and staff. Please know we stand with you in our shared effort to keep our communities safe through the 2020-2021 school year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Sweet".

Acting Secretary
Department of Human Services

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "L. Cherry".

Secretary
Department of Education