



PSEA Education Services Division

...IN BRIEF

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Strategies to Increase Student Comfort with Face Coverings in School

Researchers have demonstrated that wearing face coverings in public is one of the most effective ways to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and keep ourselves and our friends, neighbors, and family members healthy. Consequently, Dr. Rachel Levine, PA Secretary of Health, has issued an order requiring all students, staff, and visitors to wear face coverings in school.¹ Those school entities that are planning to open to in-person or hybrid instruction in August are currently planning for ways to meet this and other health and safety requirements within the school community.

The statewide requirement to wear face coverings in school may be a challenging adjustment for educators returning to in-person instruction this fall, particularly as students bring complex emotions related to the pandemic—fear, anxiety, defiance, confusion, resentment—with them to school. In addition, students may be caught in a sea of mixed messages about the importance of wearing face coverings in public. Where schools are opening to in-person or hybrid instruction, educators play an important role in ensuring all students develop a positive and healthy routine around wearing face coverings in school.

Below are several suggested strategies to build a positive culture of pandemic-related face covering in school.

Strategies to Establish Behavior Expectations among Students

Always model appropriate behavior. Educators' choices send powerful messages to students, and educators' consistent compliance with face covering requirements expresses our support for this important community health intervention. Appropriate behavior for educators includes wearing a face covering whenever at work or in another public venue. It also includes covering both nose and mouth with a face covering at all times. In developmentally appropriate ways, educators can consistently emphasize that wearing a face covering is a way to be a community helper.

Communicate that you take the requirement seriously. For example, check for face coverings at the door as students enter. Check with your employer to make sure that clean face coverings will be available for students who arrive to our class without one.

Use positive reinforcement. Educators know the value of positive reinforcement to foster pro-social behaviors. To reinforce appropriate choices among students, educators can offer small rewards to young students who enter class wearing a face covering. At all ages, educators can make positive comments about the face coverings

¹ The Secretary's order includes some exceptions to the face covering requirement. For additional information about the order from the PA Secretary of Health, please see PSEA's Advisory, *Pennsylvania Issues Order Requiring Universal Face Coverings to Reduce the Spread of COVID-19*.

students wear. Among younger students, educators may consider creating positive songs, dances, or other rituals to celebrate the wearing of face coverings as a positive community behavior.

Instructional Strategies to Support the Use of Face Coverings

Redesign instructional strategies as needed. Some educators' tried and true instructional strategies may rely on facial cues and expressions for their effectiveness. When possible, educators may adapt instructional strategies to be less reliant on facial expression. For instruction where facial expressions are critical, educators may consider the use of pre-recorded video or consider temporarily using a clear face shield to express emotions more fully. For both students and teachers, consider adopting shared hand or body signals to express emotions. Educators may find it difficult to discern who is speaking without seeing faces, so classes could choose to raise a hand or place a hand-on-head to signal when a student is speaking.

Build the use of face coverings into instruction, where appropriate. Where possible, use instructional images that include people wearing face coverings. Work with colleagues to develop curriculum-related instructional scenarios and tasks that have to do with appropriate COVID-19 health and safety strategies like wearing face coverings. Plan proactive lessons all staff can use as to why the community of learners benefits from public health practices like face covering—similar to seat belt usage, prohibitions on smoking in public, etc. Encourage students to find and analyze information about appropriate pandemic-related health and safety practices, as appropriate within the curriculum and developmental level.

Be prepared with accurate information. Students may hear messages at home that do not support the wearing of face coverings. It will be important for educators to have accurate and age-appropriate information at-hand to respond factually to student questions. In addition, educators may find it helpful to work with colleagues and their administration to develop shared responses for students who engage in disruptive behaviors related to the use of face coverings or the statewide requirement.

Strategies to Support Students' Social and Emotional Needs

Acknowledge discomfort in constructive ways. Some students are likely to complain about wearing face coverings. Acknowledging some discomfort and engaging in truthful conversations about the inconvenience of the pandemic may increase our credibility with students and demonstrate empathy. Educators can then help reframe the student's experience as an important way to protect each other and support our community.

Develop a structure for sharing emotions. Students are likely to bring a host of emotions about the pandemic with them into school, and the wearing of a face covering may be a constant reminder of those feelings. Educators should consider working with school administration to find appropriate ways for students to express their feelings about the pandemic and receive any supports they may need to navigate this unsettling time.

Wear or post a photo of yourself without a face covering. Young children in particular may find it intimidating or confusing to be with adults who are concealing their faces. Some children may find it comforting to have photos of your face in the classroom. To make it timely and applicable, these images of you could express different emotions or show you interacting with items that apply to the current curriculum.

Create tools for showing emotion, both for you and for your students. Our faces are windows to many of our emotions, and teaching and learning often involves eliciting emotional responses to instructional materials; covering our faces may complicate important communication about feelings. Educators and students can work together to develop a shared set of tools to express specific emotions. These tools may be signs that students can hold up or point to with specific emotions displayed or hand signals to suggest different emotional responses to things happening in the classroom.

Strategies to Have Fun

For younger students in particular, remind them that superheroes wear masks! Wearing a mask is a way that we can all be superheroes to help each other through the pandemic. Young students may want to develop their own superhero name or persona to go along with their superhero mask.

Be creative with the selection of your own face covering. You may have different face coverings for different moods, days of the week, or holidays. Or you may select face coverings that have images of some of your favorite things printed on the fabric, or that always include your favorite color in the fabric. If you are inclined to be creative, consider using your face covering to help your students learn about you and to associate your face covering with fun and curiosity.

Consider including masks or other face coverings in your classroom décor. For example, add face coverings to images of people or even animals that you have on your walls. Even your globe or your music stand could be a place to add a face covering!

Create games and art projects. Ask your employer to provide plain cloth face coverings and indelible fabric markers to encourage students to make a face covering that reflects their personality. For younger students, find time for a quick game of pin the mask on the teacher (using a photo, of course) or have students write changes to common song lyrics to support the wearing of face coverings.

Conclusion

Reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many school entities are planning to do, can create anxiety and confusion in many ways for students and staff alike. However, when it comes to wearing face coverings, educators have an opportunity to work together to build school community and provide powerful learning opportunities for students around the requirement. Working together as a school, grade level team, or content area team, educators can develop resourceful ways to encourage students to adopt face covering practices that are pro-social and that support learning.

For more Information

PSEA members who have specific concerns about the implementation of face covering requirements in their school should contact their local union leaders or PSEA UniServ Representative. PSEA members who are seeking additional suggestions of ways to support positive experiences for students in classrooms with face coverings may contact PSEA's Education Services Division, professionalllearning@psea.org.