

Office of the Governor
State of Louisiana

JOHN BEL EDWARDS
GOVERNOR



P.O. Box 94004
BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA 70804-9004
(225) 342-7015
GOV.LA.GOV

August 11, 2021

Honorable Patrick Page Cortez
President
Louisiana State Senate
Post Office Box 94183
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70804

Honorable Beth Mizell
President Pro Tempore
Louisiana State Senate
Post Office Box 94183
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70804

Dear President Cortez and Senator Mizell:

I have received your letter expressing concerns about my recent order requiring face coverings to be worn in all public places, including in K-12 schools. While I appreciate the points raised in your letter, I am certain that this order is necessary to reverse the deadly Delta surge in Louisiana.

Your letter, echoing one received from a few members of the House of Representatives earlier this week, asks for decisions about face covering requirements to be made at the local level. As we approached this school year, I was in support of that very position. However, as we have seen throughout this pandemic, the facts have changed in two significant ways. First, the Delta variant is surging exponentially, threatening the health and safety of the people in Louisiana in ways we have not seen since the pandemic began. At the press conference on August 2 when I announced the mask mandate, Dr. Catherine O'Neal of Our Lake of the Lake warned that Louisiana is in the "darkest days of the pandemic." Her words have unfortunately proved to be too true, as we have added almost 1000 people to Louisiana hospitals with COVID-19 and have lost almost 300 people Louisianans to COVID-19 in the nine days that have passed since that press conference. We simply must reverse the dangerous trajectory we are experiencing throughout the state. Secondly, at the time I issued the order, only five school districts in the state had made the hard decision to require masks for the safety of their students for this school year, while the other districts were simply recommending that students wear masks. Recommendations for masks would likely mean that many students and teachers would have started the school year, at the height of the pandemic, without the very protection that is necessary to stop the spread of Delta. Based upon the unanimous advice of public health experts throughout the state, I simply could not let that happen. The facts of the pandemic changed and our response needed to change with it.

Honorable Patrick Page Cortez
Honorable Beth Mizell
August 11, 2021
Page 2

The need for face coverings at this time in Louisiana, especially in K-12 schools, is clear. The Centers for Disease Control updated its guidance for schools in light of the highly contagious Delta surge providing for “universal indoor masking for all teachers, staff, students, and visitors to K-12 schools, regardless of vaccination status. Children should return to full-time in-person learning in the fall with layered prevention strategies in place.” <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html>. This is especially important in areas of high COVID incidence. At this time, every single parish in the state is considered to be an area of high incidence, with the State as a whole having one of the highest transmission rates in the *world*. In a call yesterday with the chief medical officers for hospitals throughout the state, the direness of the situation in Louisiana was made crystal clear. Hospital ICUs are full of patients who are significantly younger than in past surges. Many hospitals are having to stop all non-emergent medical procedures, so that needed heart surgeries or cancer treatments are being delayed because of staffing and resource limitations. Urgent care facilities and clinics are having to close because nurses and doctors are themselves out with COVID. Additionally, larger hospitals are having to decline accepting the transfer of patients from smaller hospitals around the state who are in critical need of care. All are desperate for additional staff resources to help treat the ever increasing number of COVID patients. As leaders, we all must do our part to help our weary health care providers who are on the front lines of this fight.

In that same call, there was significant concern raised about the effect Delta is having on children. It is clear that we are now seeing more children get sick than in previous surges, and in many cases, with much more serious consequences. In the first week of July, 569 children from ages 5-17 tested positive. By the first week of August, that number increased to 5,113. Thus, the number of new children in this age range testing positive each week during that five-week span increased almost ten-fold. On the hospital CMO call, two large hospital systems reported that their pediatric positivity rate was approximately 25%. This is indisputable evidence that the Delta variant is running rampant amongst our children, right at the very time when schools are starting. We know from our K-12 experience last school year, when most students were in-person and masked, that we can provide for a safe environment for our students. Given the prevalence of COVID in all Louisiana communities at this time, we cannot assure students and teachers of that same experience if our kids are not required to wear face coverings.


The stakes at this point in time in our battle with COVID are clear. Without a requirement that our kids return to school wearing face coverings, we will have created the perfect environment for Delta to strengthen its hold in Louisiana. We will see massive disruptions in classrooms and schools. More children will become infected and their close contacts – anyone within six feet who is not masked - will be forced to quarantine. More children will get sick, some significantly so. Tragically, more children may die. These outcomes, however, are preventable, if we follow the

Honorable Patrick Page Cortez
Honorable Beth Mizell
August 11, 2021
Page 3

tried and true measures that brought us out of past COVID surges. Right now, that means having our kids mask up in schools. This is all the more important in our K-12 schools, where those students under 12 years old are ineligible to be vaccinated and there are low vaccination rates in the children who are eligible. Face covering requirements, especially if paired with increased vaccinations in our students, will help us turn the corner of this surge and provide a safe, in-person environment for our kids to be educated.

I have demonstrated throughout this pandemic that I will follow the guidance of the public health experts in the difficult decisions about our response. The universal recommendation of the public health experts and doctors on the frontline of this pandemic is to require masking for students during this surge. I ask you both to reach out to the healthcare leaders in your districts to see just how challenging this surge is for our entire state. I am confident that if you do so, you will determine that this order is in the best interest of the state at this time.

Sincerely,



John Bel Edwards
Governor

cc: Speaker Clay Schexnayder
Representative Kathy Edmonston