

Gianforte questions mask mandates, issues new rule as COVID cases climb

Governor says parents should have final say on masking

BY **KEITH SCHUBERT** - AUGUST 31, 2021 4:49 PM



 Masks in a shop window (Getty Images).

Gov. Greg Gianforte and the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Safety published an emergency rule asking local school boards to follow state guidance when issuing mask mandates, calling into question the benefits of wearing masks to ward off COVID-19 in a school setting.

While the rule does not mandate anything, it encourages school boards to let parents have the final say over whether their child should be required to wear a mask. In a statement, Gianforte, a Republican, said there is “inconclusive research” surrounding masking in schools and asserted there are “adverse impacts of masking on a child’s health, wellbeing, and development.”

Current guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends indoor masking for all teachers, staff, students, and visitors to K-12 schools, regardless of vaccination. The updated CDC recommendations came as the more infectious delta variant began to spread across the country.

Also, on Tuesday, the state reported 890 new positive COVID-19 cases, the highest since Dec. 17, 2020 pushing the state's seven-day case average above 500 for the first time since Jan. 13. The state also reported 13 new deaths and 28 more active hospitalizations.

The [rule](#) directs schools weighing mask mandates “should consider, and be able to demonstrate they considered, parental concerns in adopting the mandate.”

The rule further states schools should “provide the ability for students, and/or parents or guardians on behalf of their children, to choose to opt-out based on physical, mental, emotional, or psychosocial health concerns, as well as on the basis of religious belief, moral conviction, or other fundamental right, the impairment of which may negatively impact such students’ physical, mental, emotional, or psychosocial health.”

Across Montana, schools have hosted contentious debates over masking policies. Among the districts mandating masks are Missoula, Whitefish, Bozeman, Billings and Helena. Last week, a group of 11 parents and the nonprofit Stand Up Montana – a vocal anti-mask organization – sued three Missoula school districts over their mask policies.

Climbing caseloads and the deterioration of available hospital beds in the state is why Dr. Lauren Wilson said she was against the new rule.

“I think this is a huge step backward for COVID control in Montana at a time when our hospitals are overwhelmed and asking for help,” said Dr. Lauren Wilson, vice president of the Montana chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, about the new rule.

In a hospital occupancy report published by DPPHS on Tuesday, six of Montana's 10 large hospitals reported 70 to 90 percent of staffed beds were occupied, and one hospital reported more than 90 percent occupation. The report provided a snapshot of hospital occupancy on Monday.

Just this week, the Billings Clinic [announced](#) it was bringing in the National Guard for the second time in two years and postponing non-necessary procedures because it is overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients.

“(The governor's office) say they reviewed medical literature in making this decision but did not talk to any medical professionals in Montana, and they do not appear to have been consulting with national health experts whose job is to review the literature,” Wilson said.

Montana's professional health community has been [vocal and unified](#) about their support of masking – for children and adults – when indoors.

One area medical professionals and Gianforte agree is vaccinations.

“If more adults were vaccinated in Montana, we would not be having this conversation,” Wilson said.

With 50 percent of its eligible residents fully vaccinated, Montana lags behind other states and currently ranks 43 in doses administered per 100,000 people.

Gianforte and DPHHS announced the rule one day after the U.S. Department of Education announced the launch of investigations into five Republican-led states over their mask mandates, which the department says could be violating the civil rights laws protecting students with disabilities.

At the same time, Gianforte cast doubt on the effectiveness of masks in schools; he said, “some scientific studies we’ve carefully reviewed undoubtedly reveal the adverse impacts of masking on a child’s health, wellbeing, and development.”

Pediatric pulmonologist and mother Dr. Deborah Liptzin, who also sits on her child’s school COVID-19 advisory board, said from her experience kids are happier to be in school than they are upset about wearing masks.

“(The kids) are just so happy to be at school with their friends, they don’t really care about the masks, and the best way to keep kids in school is to use mitigation measures that have proven to work like masking, social distancing,” she said. She added, “I think the politicization of (masks) is what is traumatizing and the adults are making the kids feel like it’s a bigger deal than it is.”