

# Open letter to Alabama school boards from 102 mental health providers on masks in schools

*The opinions expressed in this perspective are those of the signatories and do not reflect those of their employers.*

*This is an opinion column.*

Masks don't pose a mental health threat to children.

We, mental health professionals practicing in Alabama, are uniting to urge school board members to do the right thing and mask the teachers, mask the staff, and yes, MASK THE KIDS.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Children's Hospital Association, Children's Hospital of Alabama, and the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) all give universal indoor masking in schools their strongest recommendation to protect our children. Unfortunately, mounting pressure from some parents who are firmly against masking in schools has some school boards searching for and clinging to any data or any opinion, regardless of reliability or credibility, that supports the "optional masking" position. Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of mental health experts agree that masks pose no danger to children's mental health, the idea that masking causes trauma, anxiety, or depression is being used to support "optional masking".

Some school boards, like Birmingham City, Huntsville City, Fairfield City, Mountain Brook City, Homewood City, and Vestavia Hills City (to name just a few) have instituted universal masking based on ADPH's back-to-school toolkit. These systems have also declined to place an expiration date on their mask orders, instead allowing the ADPH to direct when and if it is safe enough to lift the order. These are science-based choices. This is taking care of the students, teachers, and staff. These systems are to be commended.

Some schools, like Hoover City, Madison County, Auburn City, Leeds City, Tuscaloosa City, and Bessemer City, are masking for now but plan to lift their mask orders in the near future, regardless of ADPH's recommendations at that time. There are also schools who are applying exceptions to ADPH's guidance; for example, Trussville City only requires masks in certain circumstances, allowing students to spend prolonged periods of unmasked time together indoors. We strongly urge systems with mask expiration dates and masking exceptions to abandon these practices in favor of full compliance with the ADPH's guidelines.

Finally, there are schools like Alabaster City, Andalusia City, Attalla City, Calhoun County, Clay County, Coosa County, Covington County, Dale County, DeKalb County, Fayette County, Fort Payne City, Franklin County, Guntersville City, Haleyville City, Jackson County, Lamar County, Lauderdale County, Limestone County, Marion County, Marshall County, Oxford City, Pell City,

Pickens County, St. Clair County, Tuscaloosa County, and Tuscumbia County who are openly defying the experts' recommendations and remaining "mask optional". A commonly-cited reason for this defiance is concern that masks will cause mental health problems in children.

Masks don't pose a mental health threat to children. However, there *are* several pandemic-related experiences that do: school closures, the death of a primary caregiver, loss of economic security, increased domestic abuse in socially-isolated homes, and the absence of resources that kids count on school to provide, like special education services, counseling services, and school lunches.

What is the best way to avoid each of these experiences? Medical experts—including the ADPH—have told us repeatedly: universal indoor masking in every school, along with vaccination for every eligible person.

School boards know that masks are necessary to keep their schools open. Experts have told them repeatedly that masks are necessary and do not cause undue stress or mental health problems in children. Unfortunately, the pressure from parents focused on "personal choice" (regardless of what that "choice" may mean for the health of others) has some school boards looking for any excuse they can find to justify not mandating masks in their schools. But this is negligence. As mental health providers, we are uniting to publicly affirm that no legitimate study has found any negative relationship between masking and pediatric mental health. In fact, a [growing number of studies](#) have found a positive relationship between masking during the pandemic and mental health.

School board members, stop using mental health to excuse your negligence. Sure, if you look hard enough you may encounter a doctor or two, possibly with a personal agenda or conflict of interest, who will tell you what you want to hear. But why would you take the advice of a few outliers when the vast majority of doctors and mental health professionals are in agreement that masks pose no risk to children's mental health?

School board members, do the right thing *now* rather than waiting to become a cautionary tale for other districts. For example, the Vestavia Hills City school board finally instituted universal masking this week but only after costing many students COVID exposures and subsequent quarantines which could have been avoided by masking. Cullman County now boasts five closed schools after refusing to mask its students. If these school boards had deferred to the experts when they should have, they could have spared their teachers, staff, students, and communities considerable stress.

There are procedures to prepare and protect students from known and possible threats, such as tornadoes, fire, and active shooters. Masking is another protection that we owe students, particularly the elementary-aged who do not have vaccine access and are hearing that they are vulnerable to the delta variant. This vulnerability without tools for protection has a high likelihood of contributing to worry and anxiety among children in an already-strained time.

School board members, nobody is asking you to make a decision about whether masks work or whether they are warranted in your district right now. Those decisions have already been made for all Alabama school districts by the infectious disease and public health experts at the ADPH. Your only decision is whether you are going to listen. Please defer to the experts. Order masks in your

schools, rigorously enforce proper mask-wearing in your schools, and do not specify a deadline. They will tell you when it is safe to unmask.

Mask the staff, mask the teachers, and MASK THE KIDS.

Christine Agee, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Caleigh Alevy, LMSW, Licensed Master Social Worker

Ashley Alspaugh, MSN, Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner

Ellen Amrock, MD, Psychiatrist

Glenn Archibald, MD, Psychiatrist

Heather Austin, Ph.D., Pediatric Psychologist, President, Alabama Psychological Association

Kirstin Bailey, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Steve Bair, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist

Donna Barnes, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

William Beidleman, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Kristen Berthiaume, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Joel Blackstock, LICSW, MSW, PIP, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker, Clinical Director

Kelly Bolton, LICSW, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker

Amanda Boyd, PMHNP-BC, Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner

Caroline Bria, LMFT, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

Robert Campbell, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist

Margaret Canter, Ph.D., Clinical Child Psychologist

Catherine Carlson, Ph.D., MSW, Mental Health Researcher

Connie Chang, MD, Psychiatrist

Leah Cheatham, Ph.D., Social Work Researcher

Amy Cooper, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Clay Coppage, LICSW, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker

Meagan Coppage, LICSW, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker

Faith Couvillon, LPC, Licensed Mental Health Counselor

Jennifer Cox, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, Associate Professor of Psychology

Matthew Cribbet, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Karen Cropsy, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist

Jenny Cundiff, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Sparkle Cunningham, LICSW, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker

Paul Davis, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Crystal Dillard, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, Professor of Psychology, Clinic Director

Polly Edwards, Ph.D., Clinical Child Psychologist

Robin Parks Ennis, Ph.D, BCBA-D, Associate Professor of Special Education

Karen Fitzpatrick, MD, Psychiatrist

Wayne Fleisig, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

William Ford, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Kristen Foster, LICSW, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker

Laura Gold, LCSW, Licensed Clinical Social Worker

Marissa Gowey, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Melissa Greenfield, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist

Heather Gunn, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, Assistant Professor of Psychology

Ted Haigler, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Ashley Hanson, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Ehtsham Haq, MD, Psychiatrist

Mark Harrison, LICSW, PIP, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker

Abbi Hattem, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist (retired)

Lucy Hollis, LPC, Licensed Professional Counselor

Emily Holm, LPC, NCC, RPT, Licensed Professional Counselor, Play Therapist & Board Certified Counselor

Melissa Hunt, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Vincent Intoccia, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist

Katie Jackson, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Matthew Jarrett, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Lavonda Johnson, LCSW, Licensed Clinical Social Worker

Candace King, MD, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist

Vintra King, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Kelli Lasseter, LPC-S, Clinical Counselor

Lauren Maloney, Ph.D., Clinical Child Psychologist

Daniel Marullo, Ph.D., Pediatric Psychologist & Neuropsychologist

William Meneese, Ph.D., Clinical Neuropsychologist

Gabrielle Metz, MSW, LICSW, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker

Ginger Morrison, PhD., Clinical Psychologist

Donna Murdaugh, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

TeNisha Murry, LICSW, PIP, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker

Laura Nelson, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Misti Norton, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Tiffany Nowell, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Kim Olson, MA, LPC, Licensed Professional Counselor

Roger Patton, MD, Psychiatrist

Diana Paulk, Ph.D., Counseling Psychologist

Renee Peacock, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Dori Pekmezi, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist and Professor

Sam Popkin, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Chebon Porter, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Kristin Powell, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

June Preast, Ph.D., NCSP, Assistant Professor of School Psychology

Amy Pribyl, LICSW, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker

Brandon Pruett, MD, Ph.D., Attending Psychiatrist, Assistant Professor

Susan Rathmell, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Nina Reynolds, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Leslie Rodrigues, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Dana Ross, Ph.D., Clinical (Medical) Psychologist

Sarah Rowe, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Julia Sanford, LICSW, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker

Heather Schuck, LICSW, PIP, Licensed Clinical Social Worker

Sabin Sebastian, MD, Psychiatrist

Soumya Sivaraman, MD, MSHQS, Psychiatrist

Kristen Smith, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Krystal Smith, LICSW, Licensed Clinical Social Worker

Laura Steele, MD, Child Psychiatrist

Sara Stromeyer, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Angela Stowe, Ph.D., Licensed Professional Counselor

S. Justin Thomas, Ph.D., DBSM, Clinical Psychologist

Molly Thompson, LICSW, Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker

Peggy Thornton, Ph.D., Counseling Psychologist

Tiffany Waller, CRNP, PMHNP-BC, Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner

Brandy Walls, LCSW, Licensed Clinical Social Worker

Tomalisa Washington, MSCE, Mental Health Counselor

Bradley White, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, Associate Professor of Psychology,

Susan White, Ph.D., Clinical Child Psychologist

Andrea Winslett, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Jessica Wood, LCSW, Licensed Clinical Social Worker

Julie Woosley, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist