

March 1, 2022

Dear Director Worsham and Dr. Duchin,

On Friday, February 18, elected union leaders representing educators who live and work in King County met with representatives of Public Health and the King County Executive Office to discuss the Governor's decision to lift the state-wide mask mandate and Public Health's authority to implement a county-wide mask mandate for K-12 schools. We provided our on-the-ground expertise regarding educator experiences of masking in schools, including our insights into how removing the mask mandate too quickly would negatively impact our school communities. For the reasons described below, we are collectively advocating that Public Health **maintain a masking requirement until at least May 1** (approximately two weeks after spring break).

In our experience, universal required masking has been our most important mitigation measure during this pandemic (other than vaccines). Students and educators have been wearing masks in schools for over a year now, and it has become routine and accepted. In fact, universal masking provides an important sense of safety and security for our students, families, and educators during this time of enormous uncertainty. Masks contribute to feelings of safety and normalcy that schools provide our students. Removing masks will significantly disrupt that sense of normalcy and educators will struggle to explain to students why we are removing masks so soon.

Moreover, it was just a few weeks ago that we were being told to improve our masks, leading to a large number of students rallying at Seattle Public Schools headquarters demanding better masks. Removing the mask mandate now fails the many students and educators who are immuno-compromised or pregnant, who live with someone who is, or who live with young children under age 5 who cannot yet receive a vaccine. And, as you know, there continue to be a large number of children under 12 who are unvaccinated with disproportionately higher numbers of those living in more socially and economically diverse communities.

We are raising our concerns because we believe prematurely allowing the mask requirement to expire in King County schools could cause serious harm. First, we believe it could result in significant anxiety for many students, families, and educators, and exacerbate rather than help with the mental health crisis for them. Second, we believe the negative impacts of lifting the mask mandate would be most heavily felt by our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities as well as by people with disabilities. Finally, we believe it could result in a significant number of students and/or educators choosing to go on leave, which would worsen our current educator staffing shortage and unusually high number of student absences.

In order to mitigate these harms, we believe a more cautious approach is needed. We understand the recent updates by Governor Inslee and the CDC allow mask mandates to expire. The governor's announcement expressly noted that local public health

authorities can continue to act as needed to protect our population; we need PHSKC to take action and extend the mask mandate.

It is our strong recommendation that the mask mandate be lifted no earlier than May 1. This timeline would center the needs of our BIPOC communities and those who are immunocompromised or cannot yet be vaccinated. Continuing the mask mandate until two weeks after spring break puts more distance between the Omicron surge, creates a longer window to educate the community about the science behind lifting the mask mandate, gives time for the impact of transmission due to spring break travel to subside, and allows our school community time to emotionally prepare for such a significant transition.

Collectively we represent over thirteen thousand educators in King County. Together we express our deep appreciation for your leadership and incredibly hard work these past two years. Thank you for your consideration of these factors in your decision-making process.

Respectfully,

Jennifer Matter, *President of Seattle Education Association*

Dr. Sandra L. Hunt, *President of Highline Education Association*

Julianna K. Dauble, *President of Renton Education Association*

Valisia A. Simpson, *President of Renton Education Support Professionals*

Jen Ben, *President of Renton Professional Technical Association*

Barb Cruz, *President of WEA Cascade UniServ Council and Co-President Shoreline Education Support Professionals Association*

Shannon McCann, *President of Federal Way Education Association*

Allison Snow, *President of Bellevue Education Association*

Rochelle Greenwell, *President Kent Association of Paraeducators*

Debra Aldous, *President of Tukwila Education Association*

Antoinette L. Felder, *Chair of WEA Action Coordination Team*

Howard Mawhinney, *President of Lake Washington Education Association*