



FAQ on PA DOH's Face Covering Mandate

On Tuesday, August 31, 2021, Governor Tom Wolf announced that an [Order signed by Pennsylvania's Acting Secretary of Health requiring face coverings to be worn in all school entities](#), including school districts, brick and mortar and cyber charter schools, private and parochial schools, career and technical centers, intermediate units, and early learning and other child care settings, **effective Tuesday, September 7, 2021**. Dr. Noe Ortega, the Secretary of Pennsylvania's Department of Education (PDE) reiterated that, *"This Order will help maximize the chances for regular school operations and minimize student and staff quarantines as the school year gets underway. The Order also acknowledges that face covering requirements can't go on forever. The Administration will continue to evaluate community transmission rates, vaccination data, and other indicators, and will provide a comprehensive update to the education community by October 1, 2021, to inform decisions about the Order's statewide application going ahead."*

With these events taking place, and the secretary of PDE's statement, I believe it is safe to say that the face covering mandate for students and staff in school will be in effect for some time here in PA. Directly related to this new Order, PDE developed a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page to assist parents and members of our community with understanding how the face covering order may affect them. Below are some excerpts from the [FAQ page](#).

Q: How long will face coverings be required in school entities?

A: The Order is effective 12:01 AM on Tuesday, September 7, 2021, and will remain in effect until the Acting Secretary of Health determines the public health risk is sufficiently reduced so that face coverings are no longer necessary as public health tools in school entities.

Q: Are there exceptions to the Acting Secretary of Health's Order?

A: All individuals must wear a face covering while in school entities unless they meet one of the exceptions in [Section 3 of the Order](#).

Section 3: Exceptions to the face covering requirement

The following are exceptions to the face covering requirements in Section 2. All alternatives to wearing a face covering, including the use of a face shield, should be exhausted before an individual is excepted from this Order.

- A. If wearing a face covering while working would create an unsafe condition in which to operate equipment or execute a task as determined by local, state, or federal regulators or workplace safety guidelines.
- B. If wearing a face covering would either cause a medical condition, or exacerbate an existing one, including respiratory issues that impede breathing, a mental health condition or a disability.
- C. When necessary to confirm the individual's identity.
- D. While obtaining a service that requires the temporary removal of the face covering, such as dental services.
- E. When working alone and isolated from interaction with other people with little or no expectation of in-person interaction.
- F. If an individual is communicating or seeking to communicate with someone who is hearing-impaired or has another disability, where the ability to see the mouth is essential for communication.
- G. Engaged in an activity that cannot be performed while wearing a mask, such as eating and drinking, or playing an instrument that would be obstructed by the face covering
- H. When a child/student is participating in a sports practice activity or event, whether indoors or outdoors.

Q: Are individuals required to show proof of an exception to the Order?

A: Notwithstanding the exceptions in [Section 3 of the Order](#), school entities may require medical documentation.

Q: Under what circumstances are students permitted to remove their face coverings?

A: Along with the exceptions in Section 3 of the Order; students are permitted to remove their face covering:

1. When students and staff are eating or drinking.
2. When students are outside.
3. When students are at Phys. Ed., recess, or doing other physically exerting activities.
4. During masking breaks throughout the day (i.e., ten (10) minute break per/hour or a standard class period).

Q: What should a school entity do when an individual, who does not meet the allowable exceptions, refuses to wear a face covering?

A: This is a legal Order under the [Disease Prevention and Control Law](#). School entities are expected to enforce the Order as they do other state laws. Reasonable steps may include developing and implementing a policy, training staff on conflict management, and monitoring and taking corrective actions in instances of noncompliance among staff, students, customers, or visitors.

School entities should not enforce face covering requirements when there is an exception under [Section 3 of the Order](#) or if it is unsafe to do so; and should not restrain, use force, or physically remove teachers, children/students, staff, or visitors who refuse to comply with this Order when it would not otherwise be legal to do so. Schools may not violate any other laws, including state and federal anti-discrimination laws, in implementation of the Order.

Q: What are the potential consequences if a school entity fails to comply with the Order?

A: Failure to implement and follow the control measures under the Order subjects a person to the penalty provisions of the [Disease Prevention and Control Law of 1955](#). Failing to implement or follow the control measures may also expose individuals to personal liability under 42 Pa.C.S. § 8550 (relating to willful misconduct), as well as other remedies as provided by law.

Q: What type of face covering complies with this Order?

A: The Order requires individuals to wear a "face covering." "Face covering" means covering of the nose and mouth with material that is secured to the head with ties, straps, or loops over the ears or is wrapped around the lower face. A "face covering" can be made of a variety of synthetic or natural fabrics, including cotton, silk, or linen.

A "face covering" may be factory-made, [sewn by hand, or be improvised from household items](#), including, but not limited to, scarfs, bandanas, t-shirts, sweatshirts, or towels.

Q: Does a disposable face shield suffice as a face covering?

A: Wearing a cloth face covering is best. A disposable face shield is considered an alternative to a face covering and may be worn when wearing a face covering, as defined above, is otherwise not possible.

Q: Are individuals who are vaccinated required to wear a face covering in schools?

A: Yes. Due to the circulating and highly contagious Delta variant, the Order applies to all children/students ages two years or older, staff, teachers, and visitors when indoors in school entities, regardless of vaccination status and community transmission level.

Q: Are individuals covered by this Order required to wear a face covering outdoors?

A: No. The Order does not require face coverings when outdoors. Individuals should follow the [most current guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) on mask use outdoors.

Q: Do groups using the school after hours have to follow the face covering order?

A: Yes. The Order applies to all activities occurring indoors in the school entity, regardless of when the activity occurs.