

August 26, 2021

Bluffview School Board,

My name is Heather Teichroew. My husband, Jacob Teichroew has also helped formulate this letter. I want to start out by introducing ourselves a little. Both Jacob and I have loved and served/worked in this Bluffview community for over 10 years. We have loved and supported not only the education this school provides but also the value of children that Bluffview has shown. Jacob is still a teacher within the Winona community, he is a coach for two varsity sports, and served on the Bluffview board. I have worked intermittently at Bluffview and am currently a Clinical mental health therapist within Winona and surrounding counties. I have been doing clinical work for almost 8 years. Jacob and I also do foster care and recently adopted 3 girls from foster care a year ago. The past 2 years our girls have attended Bluffview and we have enjoyed having them in a community Jacob and I have loved so dearly.

We write this letter to continue discussing the impacts of masks on children's mental, emotional, and developmental health, as well as the impacts on their learning

A mask, what did a mask represent before this past 18 months of COVID. Masks were worn for Halloween to hide our faces and to appear scary. They represented a hospital setting where one might be getting surgery or have a severe sickness. Some genuine and serious questions I think should be asked is what these masks now represent? What do they subconsciously instill in children? How do masks impact children learning how to talk and speak correctly? How does a mask impact a child's social and emotional development? How do masks impact children's ability to learn and the quality of learning? How do masks and constant fear impact children?

Since COVID started the mental and emotional impact I have seen as a clinical therapist has been disheartening. There was a significant increase in my referrals for mental health treatment from the beginning of COVID. Many families were struggling to manage shutdowns, kids schooling, stress, fear, children's behaviors at home, and much more. As the vaccine came out and we went into the summer months I began to see a glimpse of hope and children start to calm while making clinical improvements. Then yet again within the past two months my referrals have started to rise again. Many children have started to become anxious as school approaches. All children have had to adjust and transition numerous times with in the last 18 months. They have had to give up school support systems, friends, laughter, peer interaction and many more vital parts of growing and developing. The last 18 months have been 18 months of many unknowns with rules and regulations changing daily. Majority of these children voice fear, they voice fear as they are told they may have to wear a mask, because that is what masks represent, fear and unknown everywhere.

Constant change, lack of structure, and unknown is clinically known to be at risk for increased stress, anxiety, depression, lack of safety, and lack of security for children. All of which these have occurred for children in the last 18 months. Let me give some examples of unnecessary fear I have witnessed in the last 18 months. Obsessive hand washing due to fear of germs. Not only have clients of mine presented this but our youngest had as well, all last year. Leaving the house with multiple, up to four, masks. Many children have presented with significant anxiety around "what if" while having a hard time understanding every changing concept of COVID. There has been a significant increase in self harm and suicidal ideation in not only teens but all children of losing hope of what they view as normal. Children

have stated they will get overly frustrated when wearing a mask due to inability to breathe well, causing a “suffocation” feeling.

Not only can fear and stress cause significant mental health struggles; the impact stress and fear have on learning is significant. An article written by Harvard University states “For young children who perceive the world as a threatening place, a wide range of conditions can trigger anxious behaviors that then impair their ability to learn and to interact socially with others”.

The question is often asked when will this (COVID) be over? The real answer is probably never, viruses like this do not just disappear. However, we as a society get to choose how we are going to deal with these tough situations. We (YOU) have a choice, do we continue to drag this pandemic out and put more stress and anxiety on our children by forcing them to wear masks, or do we make a choice to take a stand for our children and give them an opportunity to go to school where they can feel safe and a place that they want to go to every day. We need people to stand up for our children, we need people to look out for the child’s best interest. Bluffview can be that place again that people come to because they feel like their children are cared for and their interests are put first. We urge you to make masks an optional choice for children and their families.

We appreciate you taking the time to read this as you make decisions on this upcoming school year. We implore that you do what is best by allowing families and individuals to decide whether their child (s) wear a mask or not at Bluffview.

Sincerely,

Jacob and Heather Teichroew