

You only have to spend 5 seconds around Montessori education to know that it values the whole child and that it follows the lead of the child. This is how my children are leading me:

One – has developed anxiety and depression during Covid-19. He plucks his eyelashes, eyebrows, and hair. He has a bald spot on his head. He gnaws on his fingernails and toenails obsessively until they are bleeding and sore. Ask anyone at Bluffview – typically he treats school like business, ready to learn like it's his job. My from birth, 5am riser was having to be drug out of bed almost 2 hours later and had no desire to go to school. He also has glasses that fog up constantly from hot breath escaping his mask – he has actually shown me an intentional altered way of breathing to try to address this.

Another one – We have seen explosions of anger from a child who is typically the peacekeeper, only to slump shoulders and sob at how overwhelmed he is and struggling to find the words to explain what's happening in his world, the Covid-19 world.

We have a Kindergartener with English as a 2<sup>nd</sup> language. She has glasses and hair everywhere and barely a nose bridge to keep her mask in place. There is so much happening ON her face, and it all migrates towards scrunching together at her eyes.

We do have one child who tolerates a mask.

My husband specializes in crisis medical services which means he has a lot of experience interacting with acute mental health. I have a Masters in Social Work and previously worked for Social Services as a Foster Care worker. We can see for ourselves, as parents and as professionals, the impact masks have on children. How can any child can be expected to focus and learn with the added distraction of masks?

Based on a Montessori approach, we invited our children into conversation around masking. Two verbalized strong dislike of masks. One stated they were willing to be brave and make new friends at a new school as long as they didn't have to mask and could do school with paper and pencil versus on a computer screen. Being guided by their input, we would mask one child and have 3 unmasked. The problem is, it's not our choice. Even though, no one knows my kiddos better than me. No one is going to fight to save them from death more than me. If I'm ok taking the perceived risk of not masking my child in school there must be a good reason.

There is a reason parents are standing up and saying enough is enough. Certain factors concerning Covid-19 are elevated when it serves the purposes of promoting certain agendas. For example, last year's effort was about keeping the elderly and those with co-morbidities and risk factors safe until a vaccine was available. The message that children were at minimal risk and not to worry was loud and clear. Now that everyone except 2-12 year olds have had ample time to vaccinate, the focus has pivoted to promoting the necessity of protecting these same children; the population with an uncontested miniscule death rate (3 deaths in the state of MN in the entirety of the pandemic) and exceedingly less severe illness. And yet, Winona County board member, Chris Meyer was quoted in the Winona Post (8/25) stating, "we are still at a time when kids under 12 cannot be vaccinated, we are putting them at risk." At risk for what? Parents want facts produced to back Mrs. Meyer's statement, because this is an emerging opinion not previously held during the pandemic and not supported by scientific data. If parents are going to be stripped of their choice regarding their children, there needs to be irrefutable evidence why. Constantly changing the goal posts and the game is not a substitute for reasonable proof

and explanations. Rather, it makes for mixed messages and frustrated players with an unrealistic and potentially unattainable goal.

Last year we moved cross country, back to Winona just before the start of school. Bluffview was a huge reason for this move. Fast forward to Spring Break. My husband and I realized that our children, between the masks and cracked, bleeding hands from constant sanitizer and hand washing, were taking more precautions in school than HE was taking as a frontline provider working with actual Covid cases in the local emergency department. This is when we realized we had to move...again. We retreated out of state where all 4 of our children played Spring baseball (March to June) without masks. Not one child in that program contracted Covid-19. The changes we saw in our kids were 180 degrees from where they'd been. They haven't worn a mask since early March of last year. The ugly side is that during this time, our family was broken apart by 1,000 miles. My husband was in Winona, on our community front lines in the ED, while the kids and I were far away, doing what we needed to do to protect and care for our family.

We want to be clear. We believe Covid-19 is a real virus and that certain mitigation efforts are more effective than others. We are not anti-vaccine. And we are more than happy for families who want to mask their children to do so. But we also believe there are enough high quality, scientific studies available, that after critical thought and analysis, masking a child in school should only be recommended. Proper fit is a huge factor in mask efficacy. We've all seen masks below the nose, touching masks, gaps in masks, taking masks off laying them on a surface and then putting them back on...from adults! How can we expect children to wear masks appropriately? We are asking them to be mature beyond their years. The long-term damage (cavities, migraines, social, emotional, mental health, developmental, weakened immune system) of masking a healthy child far surpasses the benefits. There has been a huge psychological shift in our society where we are skeptical that the healthy might be sick. There's a false narrative that if we just check the right boxes and do all the deemed correct things that somehow, we'll stave off uninvited illness. Following the rabbit trail of actual literature and studies, there just isn't evidence to defend mandating a recommendation. Mitigation efforts need to be chosen in context of all the data, considering local demographics and viewpoints on both sides of the argument, and minimizing fear as the motivator.

We appreciate Bluffview's success in minimizing Covid-19 within the school walls last year, as well as running their summer program masks optional. We appreciate their transparency in sharing the proposal for this coming school year. And, we appreciate the opportunity to respectfully disagree. With a smaller student and staff population, as well as a commitment to fresh air policies (Shown as a very effective mitigation tool. Bluffview already has outdoor recess at 0 degrees or above and the classrooms have large windows that could be cranked open to promote circulation), we have so much confidence that making masks optional would be very plausible and executed with great success...just as previously demonstrated by Bluffview concerning Covid-19 mitigation efforts. We know family choice for masking is a valid option, as other schools in our local community, the state of MN, and across the United States have moved forward with this opportunity.

However, if we choose not to send our kids to school masked, when masks are optional our children will not be able to return to Bluffview. They will have lost not only their spot at the chartered school but their educational community and friends as well. While the desire to create a culture where masks are not stigmatized and presented as more of a norm, as social beings that crave community, there is nothing "normal" about covering our faces. Our children trust us and we will not abuse that trust by

forcing them to do something we don't view as founded in logic with a sound argument. As parents, the last thing we want to hear from our children a decade or two from now is, "if you had convictions that we didn't need to be masked, why did you ask us to wear them every day at school anyway?" Ultimately, our children look to us as we navigate a crazy world, and we will continue doing our best to do right by them.