

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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September 14, 2022

Ms. January Contreas
Assistant Secretary
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
300 C St. S.W.
Washington D.C., 20201

Dear Ms. Contreas,

We write to conduct oversight of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Head Start program continuing its policy of requiring masks for toddlers in schools nationwide. Not only does this go against current Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, numerous studies have shown it is detrimental to children to be continually subjected to mask wearing; children learning how to speak, interact socially, and interpret the world around them at early ages have the most to lose from this mask policy developmentally, economically, and educationally.¹ With Head Start programs being operated by local non-profit organizations in almost every county in the country, the number of children negatively affected will be significant, and not only affect long term individual welfare, but productivity and prosperity in the United States overall.²

The CDC recommends masks for toddlers only in areas of high transmission. However it remains an outlier in recommending masks for toddlers at all.³ Other countries, including the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark among others, follow the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendation *against* masking children ages 5 and younger.⁴ Children often struggle to wear masks properly,⁵ and masks create a barrier between them, their teacher, and classmates that negatively impacts their ability to learn.⁶ Similarly, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control does not recommend masks in schools for children under age 12.⁷

¹ Anya Kamenetz, *After 2 Years, Growing Calls to Take Masks Off Children in School*, NPR (Jan. 28, 2022).

² Off. of the State Superintendent of Educ., *Early Learning Services for Parents – Head Start*, DC.GOV (last visited August 25, 2022).

³ Dana Goldstein, *At Head Start, Masks Remain on, Despite C.D.C. Guidelines*, THE N.Y. TIMES (Sept. 7, 2022).

⁴ Margery Smelkinson, Leslie Bienen, & Jeanne Noble, *The Case Against Masks at School*, THE ATLANTIC (Jan. 26, 2022).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Supra*, n. 1

⁷ *Id.*

HHS’s decision to go against the evidence that masks hinder learning and social development in children warrants explanation and swift correction. Parents and children nationwide are still struggling from education setbacks from remote learning. For example, reading and math scores in the United States declined to its lowest levels in decades during the pandemic.⁸ Wearing masks is contributing to this decline; mask wearing makes it difficult for students to hear, understand speech, and identify facial expressions, and emotions—crucial developmental functions, especially in the first three years of a child’s life.⁹ The recognition and response to one another’s facial expressions is a critical and necessary component of social interaction in schools, helping both students and teachers communicate.¹⁰

Head Start programs are specifically designed to promote “school readiness of infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children from families with low income.”¹¹ As such, the Federal program is responsible for prioritizing the early social and cognitive development of children from already disadvantaged backgrounds. In response to criticism about continuing to mask these children in Head Start programs, HHS responded that updating the official rules for the program is a “lengthy process.”¹² That hardly seems a sufficient reason to continue to harm the most vulnerable students.

Continuing to mask the youngest, most vulnerable students will have a long-term impact on their education and future success. A study from the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that kids “who don’t read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers,” and “for the worst readers, those [who] couldn’t master even the basic skills by third grade, the rate is nearly six times greater.”¹³ The Bureau of Labor Statistics found that high school graduates earn nearly \$200 more per week than those who do not complete high school.¹⁴ In addition, students who do not graduate high school are more likely to be unemployed.¹⁵ These troubling statistics are likely to be made even worse if young children fall behind in school and are unable to develop basic skills because of masking requirements.

While private schools nationwide are going mask-optional, children in Head Start programs are put at an automatic disadvantage at a critical age due by continuing this policy.¹⁶ We are concerned that young students from low-income families who fail to meet developmental benchmarks by certain ages may be less likely to be successful and financially stable in the

⁸ NAT’L ASSESSMENT OF ED. PROG., THE NATION’S REPORT CARD, READING AND MATHEMATICS SCORES DECLINE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC (Sept. 1, 2022).

⁹ *Supra*, n. 1.

¹⁰ Manfred Spitzer, *Masked Education? The Benefits and Burdens of Wearing Face Masks in Schools During the Current Corona Pandemic*, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE (Sep. 20, 2020).

¹¹ *Head Start Services*, U.S. DEP’T OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES (June 23, 2022).

¹² *Supra*, n. 4.

¹³ The Editorial Board, *The School Shutdowns and Lost Literacy*, THE WALL ST. J. (Feb. 24, 2022).

¹⁴ U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, EMPLOYMENT PROJECTIONS, EDUCATION PAYS (last visited Aug. 26, 2022).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Collen Hroncich & Solomon Chen, *School Choice Is the Way to Prevent Mask Battles in Schools*, CATO INST. (Oct. 28, 2021).

future, causing a greater poverty gap in America. It is troubling that this decision requiring masks is not based on the scientific consensus used by many of the world's most developed nations. In order to better understand the rationale behind the Head Start program's decision to continue to mask children ages 2 and older, please provide the following documents and information as soon as possible but no later than September 28, 2022. In addition, please provide a staff level briefing no later than September 21, 2022.

1. All studies relied upon when crafting the Head Start COVID-19 masking policy for the 2022-2023 school year.
2. All communications between or amongst the Administration for Children and Families and the Office of Head Start relating to the COVID-19 masking policy in the Head Start programs.
3. Document sufficient to show whether and how the Administration for Children and Families and the Office of Head Start considered the adverse effects of masking young children when drafting the Head Start COVID-19 masking policy.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X. Thank you in advance for your cooperation with this inquiry.

Sincerely,



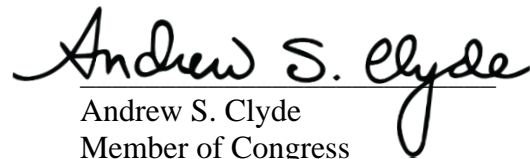
Michael Cloud
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy



Fred Keller
Member of Congress



Scott Franklin
Member of Congress



Andrew S. Clyde
Member of Congress

Cc: The Honorable Raja Krishnamoorthi, Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy