



July 6, 2020

Pennsylvania Issues Order Requiring Universal Face Coverings to Reduce the Spread of COVID-19

Dr. Rachel Levine, PA Secretary of Health, has issued a ***statewide order requiring universal face coverings*** to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the Commonwealth. ***The order applies immediately to all individuals in school entities*** including but not limited to public K-12 schools, brick and mortar and cyber charter schools, private and parochial schools, career and technical centers, intermediate units, detention centers, PA Pre-K Counts programs, Head Start programs and preschool early intervention programs.

The order includes three important types of information, summarized below: 1) a definition of face covering; 2) a list of circumstances in which face coverings are required; and 3) exceptions to the face covering requirement.

Definition of Face Covering

The PA Department of Health defines a face covering as a covering of the mouth and nose secured to the head with ties, straps or loops that go around the ears or wrap around the lower face. Face coverings can be made of fabrics including cotton, silk, or linen. Plastic face shields covering the nose and mouth also are considered a face covering. Face coverings may be manufactured, sewn by hand, or improvised from items such as bandanas, towels, t-shirts, or sweatshirts. Individuals who do not work in an occupational or healthcare setting that requires specialized masks should avoid using N95 respirators or other surgical or procedural masks that are intended for specialized professional use in high-risk settings.

Conditions Requiring the Use of a Face Covering

Individuals in PA are required to wear a face covering outside of their home under the following conditions:

1. When an individual is outdoors and unable to consistently maintain 6 feet of distance from individuals who are not members of their household;
2. When an individual is in any indoor location where the public are generally permitted (such as schools);
3. When an individual is waiting for, riding in, driving, or operating public transportation or paratransit. This includes individuals in a taxi, private care service, or ride-sharing vehicle (and includes school buses);
4. When an individual is receiving healthcare services, including visits to a hospital, blood bank, physician's office, pharmacy, dentist's office, veterinarian, or other health facility.
5. When an individual is engaged in work that involves interacting in-person with a member of the public, working in a space that is visited by members of the public, working in a space where food is prepared or packaged, working in or walking through common areas, or working in any other enclosed area where people may be present and unable to socially distance.

Exceptions to the Face Covering Requirement

Individuals who meet one or more of the following criteria are not required to adhere to the universal face covering requirement.

1. People who cannot wear a face covering due to a medical condition, including respiratory conditions that impede breathing and mental health or disability conditions that impede the ability to wear a face covering.

2. People in conditions that would be unsafe if a person were wearing a face covering. For example, local, state, or federal regulators and/or workplace safety guidelines may say that certain equipment operations or work-related tasks would be unsafe to perform while wearing a face covering.
3. People who are unable to remove a face covering on their own and would require assistance.
4. Children who are under two years old.
5. People who are communicating with an individual who is hearing impaired or who has another disability that requires seeing the mouth for effective communication.

Additional Clarification for Schools

The PA Department of Education has issued additional information to clarify the use of face coverings in schools.

1. Students are permitted to remove face coverings when they are spaced at least 6 feet apart. In addition, students with medical conditions or disabilities that render them unable to wear a face covering, communicate while wearing a face covering, or remove it without assistance are exempt from the face covering requirement.
2. All school entity Health and Safety Plans must reflect this face covering requirement and should be flexible to accommodate future changes to this order. Plans that have already been approved by the Board of Directors and submitted to PDE must be re-approved and re-submitted.
3. Students, coaches, and spectators at school athletic events must adhere to the face covering requirement unless an individual is covered by one of the exceptions listed above or unless individuals are able to consistently maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from others. Athletes are not required to wear face coverings while actively working out or participating in a competition but must wear face coverings when they are on the sidelines.

Issues to Consider

Instruction in a Special Education Setting. Students and educators in a special education setting are not required to wear cloth face coverings if doing so would interfere with the health of the student or educator or if the communication involves someone who is hearing impaired or who has another disability where the ability to see the mouth is essential to communication. In such cases, educators may consider using clear face shields as an alternative face covering. PSEA members with concerns about the use of face coverings in a special education setting may discuss the issue with their local union leaders and/or with their UniServ Representative.

Instruction for English Language Learners. English learners are not included in the exceptions to the universal face covering order. This means that English language educators and learners are required to wear face coverings in schools. In circumstances where clear visibility of the mouth and face are important to the learning process, educators may consider using clear face shields in lieu of cloth face coverings. In addition, educators may consider the use of video recordings in EL instruction. PSEA members with concerns about the use of face coverings in an English language learning setting may discuss the issue with their local union leaders and/or with their UniServ Representative.

Instruction in Early Childhood Education. Pennsylvania's face covering order applies to all educators and children over 2 who do not qualify for an exemption. This means that face coverings must be worn in early childhood and primary educational settings. Educators who are concerned about the impact of face coverings in environments with young children may consider using clear face shields in lieu of a cloth mask. PSEA members should check with employers to determine local policies and discuss concerns with local union leaders and/or UniServ Representatives.

Educators with Health Exceptions to the Order. Educators with certain medical conditions that impede breathing cannot be required to wear a face covering. Individuals are not required to show documentation that they have a condition for which a face covering exemption applies. Individuals with medical conditions that impede breathing may be at increased risk from the COVID-19 virus, and this risk may be exacerbated by not wearing a face

covering. PSEA members with questions about their specific medical conditions and risk from the COVID-19 virus should consult with a medical professional.

Assistive Devices for Sound Projection. Some educators may be concerned that the combination of socially-distanced students and the use of face coverings will make it difficult to project a “teacher voice” to communicate effectively with all students. Educators with concerns about voice projection from behind a face covering may consider requesting amplification equipment from their employer. PSEA members who have concerns about access to necessary amplification equipment should contact their local union leaders and/or UniServ Representative.

Lessons about Wearing Face Coverings. Before students return to school, educators should be provided time to gather resources and develop lessons and strategies to increase students’ comfort with adults who cover their faces and to support the wearing of face coverings by all students.

For Additional Information

PSEA members who have questions or concerns about face covering policies and practices at their place of work should contact their local union leaders or PSEA UniServ Representative. PSEA members with general questions about face covering requirements in the Commonwealth or who are seeking ideas to incorporate mask-wearing lessons into instruction may contact PSEA’s Education Services Division: professionallearning@psea.org.