

Dear Superintendents:

I know many of you are in a difficult position. The pandemic has required us to navigate changing circumstances and guidance. I deeply appreciate your leadership and the courage and integrity you have shown in tremendously challenging times. Many of you have requested clarity on the action the Illinois State Board of Education will take to enforce the universal indoor masking requirement, and this communication seeks to provide that clarity.

As you know, [Executive Order 2021-18](#), which went into effect last Wednesday, requires that all students, staff, and visitors wear masks indoors in all P-12 schools in Illinois. Governor Pritzker took this action after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended it.

The purpose of the universal indoor masking requirement is to ensure all students can safely attend school in-person this fall. We know that consistent and correct mask use is the simplest, most effective way to keep students safely in school, where they can learn and grow to their fullest potential. Masks work best when everyone wears one. Research conducted by the CDC found that schools are safe **when they have prevention strategies in place**, as documented in the updated [guidance](#) from ISBE and the Illinois Department of Public Health.

The Delta variant is causing a surge in cases and hospitalizations, and masking is a critical strategy to protect students' access to in-person learning and to keep students, staff, and the community around them safe. We don't throw our umbrella away in a rainstorm because we're not getting wet. We have to keep our umbrella up until the storm passes.

**The executive order has the force of law.** I understand the pressure some school and district leaders may be facing from community members, and I will provide you with every support to understand, communicate, and comply with the order.

However, noncompliance is not an option. I will not compromise the health and safety of students or staff, nor will I risk even one child's life.

Local boards of education, schools, and school districts do not have the authority to deny the Governor's Executive Order requiring universal indoor masking in schools. Doing so not only puts students' health and safety at risk but also opens the district to extraordinary legal liability – potentially without any insurance to cover damages. I strongly recommend that each district consult with its legal counsel and insurer to fully understand the repercussions.

Further, ISBE has and will use its regulatory authority, pursuant to 23 Ill Admin. Code 1.20, to ensure school districts protect students and staff; if school districts fail to do so, this risks State recognition.

A district would have multiple opportunities to remedy the deficiencies that present a health hazard or a danger to students or staff before becoming unrecognized. A district would first have its recognition status changed to "On Probation" and would be asked to submit a corrective action plan. Failure to address the deficiencies would lead to nonrecognition, meaning total loss of access to state funding and loss of the school's ability to engage in any Illinois High School Association and Illinois Elementary School Association athletic competitions.

These are not steps anyone at ISBE wishes to take nor should these steps be necessary. School districts have the moral and legal obligation to follow public health requirements and guidance to keep their students and staff safe.

Wearing a mask is simple, safe, and easy. I know it can be uncomfortable sometimes, but so are football helmets and seatbelts. Sometimes we have to bear a little discomfort for the sake of safety and because it's the law.

We have so many important issues to face as we start the school year, and we want to start the year off with positivity for all our students. I ask that you respect that there is a mask requirement, communicate this to your school communities, and celebrate the return to in-person learning.

Thank you for your partnership and support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Carmen I. Ayala". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial "C".

Dr. Carmen I. Ayala  
State Superintendent of Education  
Illinois State Board of Education