

Forbes Road High School
159 Red Bird Drive
Waterfall, PA 16689
Ph: 814-685-3866
Fax: 814-685-3159



Forbes Road School District
159 Red Bird Drive, Waterfall, PA 16689

Forbes Road Elementary School
143 Red Bird Drive
Waterfall, PA 16689
Ph: 814-685-3865
Fax: 814-685-3217

September 3, 2021

Dear Parents, Guardians, and Community Members:

Schools all over Pennsylvania, including our beloved Forbes Road, are currently facing the mostly deeply divisive educational environment of our lifetimes. Many of our community—from board members and staff to parents and business owners—feel that the decision about whether a child should wear a mask at school should be left to parents. Additionally, individual legislators, community organizations, and social media groups have weighed in on the issue, some sighting interpretations of what constitutes actual law and others citing fundamental rights. The amount of information—much of it conflicting—is overwhelming. We understand your frustration, and we share it.

We were as surprised as our community when the mask order was announced earlier this week and have spent the last few days exploring options that we could provide our school's parents and guardians. We thought that one option may be an affidavit that parents could sign saying that their child could not wear a mask because of health issues. However, yesterday the language allowing that option was abruptly removed in an update on the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) website. An additional communication is expected from PDE today that further details expectations of the order and lists potential sanctions for schools, their boards and their staff if the order is not followed. If the affidavit option remains, we will provide it, but we do not want to frustrate our parents further by providing an option only to have the government remove it in a day or two.

Our school solicitor has given us extensive advice on this issue. He has been in contact with seven other educational law firms that, combined, represent literally hundreds of the districts in Pennsylvania. They agree on one salient point. Despite anything we've read or heard to the contrary, lawyers specializing in educational law are agreeing that the order is a law, and that, no matter how we feel about it, a public school is required to follow and enforce the order. We would literally be breaking the law to pursue any other course of action, so Forbes Road School District will comply with the mask mandate.

All of this is aggravated by the very short timeline for both parents and the school to determine what to do now, while legislators fight a civil war about what is right. We are respectfully asking our parents to remove their children from this conflict. It is so important that children not be placed in a position where they have to defy teachers and administrators. That would be very

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stressful for children now and could have undesired (and even unsafe) outcomes later if students learn that they can pick and choose what directives they follow at school. Because we are being required to enforce the mask mandate, any child refusing to wear a mask will be segregated from students who are wearing masks. No child will be physically forced to put on a mask or sent back home.

Currently, we can offer the following options:

- Tuesday, September 7th, students can come to school and follow the mask mandate. Our focus group plans to meet soon to brainstorm ways in which we can follow the order but provide students with more time to remove masks (during phys. ed classes both inside and outside, more outside classes when weather permits, regularly scheduled mask breaks, etc.).
- A signed doctor's note that affirms your child has a medical or mental health issue that precludes them from wearing a mask. The district would then create a 504 Plan for your child to accommodate the health condition. (This is different than the signed parent affidavit that may or may not remain an option after today. If it remains an option, we will post a form on our website.)
- Utilizing this year's Forbes Road online option, which is a canned program that your child would complete. Assignments would be submitted online for Forbes Road teachers to grade. If you think you would like to try the online option, you can have your child try it for 12 calendar days without committing to stay on it. If you don't like the online program, you can return your child to on-campus learning with the mask mandate. There will be a registration form on our website beginning this weekend for anyone who wants to change to our online program.
- We want to be candid about all of your options. Parents can also sign up for an out-of-district online program. The cost of the program would be billed to the district. Those programs are very expensive, and if enough parents choose that option, it could have very negative effects on the district's budget. We have not implemented a tax increase for 14 years, which has been a challenge. Having to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars a year more would seriously affect our ability to keep taxes where they are now.
- Parents have, and have had, the right to home school their child, which means they take over their child's education entirely. Home schooled children do not receive a diploma from Forbes Road.

Because this can be a very complicated decision, we are prepared to grant parents a few days of excused absences next week while they decide what option is best for their child. If you plan to do this, please call the school office to notify us that you need this time. Also, if you need assistance with making your decision, please call to make an appointment with your building administrator to talk through what is best for your child.

It is likely that the current situation will continue to change. We will do our best to keep our families and communities informed as more or less options develop because of the directives we receive from the State agencies that govern public schools. We wish all of our Forbes Road families good health during this very difficult time.