

Schools get the brunt of latest COVID wave in South Carolina

September 18 2021, by Michelle Liu and Jeffrey Collins



Two Camden Elementary School students in masks listen as South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster talks about steps the school is taking to fight COVID-19, Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021, in Camden, S.C. McMaster has adamantly and repeatedly come out against requiring masks in schools even as the average number of daily COVID-19 cases in the state has risen since early June. Credit: AP Photo/Jeffrey Collins

In the past few weeks, South Carolina has set records for COVID-19 hospitalizations and new cases have approached peak levels of last winter. Classes, schools and entire districts have gone virtual, leaving parents frustrated and teachers quitting weeks into the school year.

Since ending South Carolina's [state of emergency](#) on June 7, Republican Gov. Henry McMaster has maintained that parents alone should decide if children wear [masks](#) in schools, even as the state's new cases soared from 150 a day on average to more than 5,000.

"We spiked the football too early. Instead of continuing to listen to medical professionals and interpreting the data, he has been guided by Republican Governors Association talking points," Democratic state Sen. Marlon Kimpson of Charleston said of McMaster.

The Republican-dominated Legislature added the provision that effectively stopped most school mask mandates despite guidance from their own state health and education officials, who have said the statewide mask ban in schools took away one of their best tools to stop the spread of COVID-19.

Now teachers, students and parents are struggling with the fallout as more [young people](#) contract the delta variant, forcing nearly two dozen schools and two entire districts—a number that shifts daily, usually upward—back to [online learning](#) within a month of returning in person.

Teacher Nicole Walker said a ripple goes through classes at her high school each time the phone rings and a student is sent to the nurse: Does their friend have COVID-19? Will they have to quarantine? The disruptions breed fear and uncertainty in the classroom, she said.

"This is one of those times where the adults should've risen to the occasion and been able to do the right thing and really been able to

create an environment where kids felt more safe," Walker said. "We have failed them miserably, in my opinion."

Walker helped build grassroots teacher organization SC for Ed, which advocates for better pay and working conditions. Now the educators talk about how districts aren't providing protective equipment in classrooms and how more teachers are quitting just weeks into the [school year](#), leaving more students crowded into classrooms.

Alison Harding noted those full classrooms and the few second graders wearing masks when she dropped off her son for his first day at Daniel Island School in Charleston last month. The 7-year-old has a neuromuscular disease, uses a wheelchair and needs devices to help him breathe.

She pulled him out of school the next day.

Now he is waiting at home for the district to provide educational services because she can't risk him getting the virus, particularly as the state hit nearly 2,600 COVID-19 patients hospitalized in early September, a record.

"If the hospitals are full, it's not a good time for him. He shouldn't be going. It's dangerous," Harding said.



Camden Elementary School students in masks listen as South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster talks to them on Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021, in Camden, S.C. McMaster has adamantly and repeatedly come out against requiring face masks in schools even as the average number of daily COVID-19 cases in the state has risen since early June. AP Photo/Jeffrey Collins)

Much of the conflict surrounds the mask rule. Though not an outright ban, the proviso prevents school districts from using state money to enforce a rule requiring masks. Nearly every person at a school has their salaries paid with some state money.

Lawmakers stuck the proposal in the state budget two days after McMaster ended the state of emergency. The governor has at times suggested masks do little to protect from the virus or they cause

developmental delays in younger children.

Although the state's top health officials have put together presentations in the past few weeks to show that is wrong, the position persists with McMaster and a number of Republican lawmakers.

"I simply refuse to aid and abet the government takeover of personal health decisions by politicians and bureaucrats who clearly can't manage this as it is—and some of them make it worse by lying to us along the way," said Sen. Shane Martin, a Republican from Spartanburg County.

But as conditions have become worse, some lawmakers from both parties are pushing for a special session to repeal the rule and allow local governments to make decisions based on their situations. The state Supreme Court also is considering a lawsuit over whether the mask provision is legal.

"I'm frustrated with the governor, with the stupid proviso, I'm frustrated that the school board won't stand up and do what's right. I wish we could take the politicalness out of it and just treat it like how any other public health issue would be treated," said Brandy Sutherland of Summerville, whose first and seventh grader had to go back to virtual school for at least a week after a year of wrestling with online classes.

A few, mostly smaller districts have passed their own mask requirements.

"I don't know how it became a debate. I don't care if it offers 1% protection. That's 1% more that I don't have today," Florence School District 1 Superintendent Richard O'Malley told his board in August before they agreed to a two-month mask rule.

The Florence [district](#) has less than a third of the COVID-19 cases

reported in Lancaster County, which has a similar number of students and more than 800 cases since the [school](#) year began less than a month ago.

But in meetings across the state, most districts aren't comfortable going against the state rule, even if it is unclear what punishment districts who break it might face.

Harding went to the Berkeley County School District meeting in late August to tell them about her son in an unsuccessful attempt to get a temporary mask requirement.

"Last week an anti-masker said to me, 'It's sad that my children are being asked to protect yours. It's not their job. That's your job,'" she told board members. "Since when is it sad to teach our children empathy and compassion and selflessness by protecting the vulnerable?"

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