UNIVERSAL MASKING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
SUSTAINING SUPPORT FOR A SUCCESSFUL SAFETY MEASURE

Fairfax County Public Schools
Office of Communication and Community Relations
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Type of School/Organization
PreK-12 School District: 180,000 students

Number of Communication Staff: 26

2022 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award Entry
Special Communication Projects/Campaigns
SYNOPSIS

Since the start of the pandemic, masking was an accepted prevention strategy in schools. It became a critical prevention strategy for the fall of 2021, when the Governor mandated five days of in-person learning. When schools opened, the delta variant was surging, and vaccines were unavailable to 50% of our students.

At the same time, divided public views over masking became more pronounced. Masking became the symbol for trust in how schools were responding to the pandemic after a Virginia gubernatorial debate. Masks also became the symbol for who had authority to make decisions about school health and safety.

Primary and secondary research indicated that while 71% of Virginia residents supported mask-wearing, these were the silent majority. A vocal minority was leading social media and media anti-masking conversation - parents dissatisfied with the way school leadership handled the pandemic. To keep school open, FCPS had to foster a shared acceptance of mask wearing among staff and families. Frequent and consistent communications needed to span media, social media, websites, newsletters and visual branding.

Ongoing support for universal masking in schools, in the face of legal and legislative attempts to dismantle it, would mean garnering community acceptance and trust that the School Board had the right to make health and safety decisions for schools.

The campaign ensured that despite political pressure, universal masking remained with only 26 student refusals, until health officials indicated it was safe to rollback layered prevention strategies. In championing, through the media, the lawsuit that highlighted the School Board’s authority to make health and safety decisions, FCPS reinforced the School Board’s place to make decisions within the Virginia Constitution.

Through the lawsuit, FCPS also gave the silent majority rationale to continue masking in the face of a controversial executive order and in line with health metrics. The campaign was successful in ensuring all schools stayed open until community rates dropped to low in March.

Additionally, it reinforced the role of communications to support the School Board and school leadership, and sparked the creation of grassroots parent and student groups supporting a broader and ongoing public education support campaign.
RESEARCH

Timeline
August 2021 - FCPS reopens to full-time in person instruction with limited virtual options
August 2021 - Delta variant surge begins in the United States
November 2021 - Vaccines become available for 5-11 year olds
December 2021 - Omicron variant surge in the United States
December-January 2021-2022 - Surrounding school districts rely on virtual instruction
January 17, 2022 - Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin signs EO2 School Mask Mandate
January 18, 2022 - FCPS maintains mask requirements for students and adults
February 4, 2022 - Judge temporarily halts Youngkin order making masks option in Va. schools after School Board lawsuit
February 16, 2022 - Virginia legislature approves new law lifting school mask mandates by 3/1
February 25, 2022 - CDC changes mask guidance and community levels
February 25, 2022 - FCPS announces changes to masking beginning 3/1
March 1, 2022 - Masks become optional in Fairfax County Public Schools

Primary Research
A June 2021 Return to School Survey was the primary informal research used to determine the best plan for in-person instruction in the Fall of 2021, and what families and students were feeling about virtual vs. in-person instruction. The survey asked families about three return to schools scenarios: virtual instruction, partial return with social distancing in place, and opting into virtual instruction if schools are reopened.

The Return to School Family Survey received 124,271 responses (66% of the 189,000 student population).

- While the survey was not designed to provide firm data around who was/was not comfortable with a return to in-person learning, all responses indicated between a 40-50% level of comfort.
- Physical health and safety was a key factor reported, along with the need to get back to normal life, and mental health needs.

While this scenario became obsolete when the Commonwealth of Virginia required schools to provide full time in-person instruction for the 2021-22 school year, it helped FCPS to explore how people would react to scenarios presented regarding in-person learning. The announcement by the Governor eliminated social distancing as a layered prevention strategy for FCPS due to the lack of space. Therefore, from June - August 2021, the FCPS Return to School Safety Plan had to focus efforts on communicating the value of other layered prevention strategies, including:

- Masking
- Vaccination
- Hand washing, etc.

Vaccination - through the VaxUp! campaign - was a critical strategy to start the school year since masking was required, while COVID vaccinations to attend school were not. Vaccinations were a factor that FCPS could influence.

- By September 30, all demographics eligible for vaccination had reached a vaccination rate of 70%, according to Fairfax County Health Department and Virginia Department of Health Data.
- Of the approximately 80% of staff to respond to a survey requesting vaccination status, 97% reported full or partial vaccination.
Secondary Research - Masking Support

A Monmouth University study found about two-thirds of registered voters (67%) – and parents specifically (64%) – supported the requirement that students, teachers, and staff in Virginia schools wear face masks during the 2021-22 school year. A VCU study found that 71% of Virginians supported the August 12 emergency statewide requirement to wear masks in K-12 schools.

Duke University research showed that proper masking is the most effective mitigation strategy to prevent secondary transmission in schools when COVID-19 is circulating, and when vaccination is unavailable or there is insufficient uptake.

Multiple studies show fewer pediatric COVID-19 case rates in counties with school mask requirements than in those without school mask requirements.

A CDC study of Arkansas school districts from August - October 2021 found that districts with mask requirements had a 23% lower incidence of COVID-19 among staff and students compared to those districts without mask requirements.

Informal social media research found that posts about masking received more positive reactions on average.

Changing Public Health Conditions

As the school year began in August 2021, the delta variant emerged, followed closely by the omicron variant in late November, severely impacting school operations throughout the nation and region, forcing many to shift to virtual learning. Omicron emerged before elementary aged children had access to the vaccine.

A Political Shift

While opposition to universal masking in schools existed since the beginning of the pandemic, the movement gained strength and speed during the 2021 Virginia Gubernatorial Election. During the debate, candidate and former Governor Terry McAuliffe, stated, “I don’t think parents should be telling schools what they should teach.” Opposition candidate Glenn Youngkin latched onto the sentiment, flipped it to a narrative around parental choice, and expanded it to mask-wearing, and other initiatives in Virginia’s public schools. On his first day in office, Youngkin signed Executive Order 2, allowing parents to elect for their children not to wear masks in school, even when required by the school district. This also called into question the constitutional right of school boards to make health and safety decisions for their school communities. Seven Virginia school systems opted to file a legal challenge to the order based on this constitutional right. Before it had reached a final decision, the Virginia House of Delegates passed SB739 which stipulates that parents may elect for their children not to wear a mask. Through the addition of an emergency clause added through the Governor’s recommendation, the law went into effect March 1, 2022.

Community groups arose around the problem that affected them (schools being closed during the pandemic), including “Open FCPS” (now defunct) and “Do Better FCPS.” These groups shifted their narrative to eliminating layered prevention strategies, especially masking, throughout the school year.

GOAL

Ensure continued public support for universal masking as a prevention strategy to keep all FCPS schools open until health experts indicate conditions warranted a rollback.

ANALYSIS/PLANNING

The lack of access to vaccinations for elementary aged children until late November, combined with the fact that social distancing was not feasible when full-time instruction was required to be offered to all students five days a week, meant that masking needed to be the key component of any health and safety campaign. FCPS had already developed a vaccination campaign to support keeping schools open. This campaign branding needed to align with that message to reinforce it and double down.
Audiences

Primary

• FCPS teachers who connect with parents/families every day
• Families who support universal masking but have remained silent

Secondary

• Mainstream media who carry weight and authority within the highly engaged beltway community

Key Messaging

Using the Coorientation Model, messaging was framed in the space where there was shared agreement with all audiences in the community (staff, families, and students). This was the importance of keeping schools safe and open.

• For FCPS, the primary responsibility was to provide safe, in-person learning and masking was a tool to achieve that goal.
• Families wanted their children to learn in school, and masking made that safer and more likely that children would not miss school for illness.
• Staff wanted schools to be safe.

In line with the Theory of Source Credibility, messaging focused on the importance of following national health experts and rolling back layered prevention strategies ONLY when it was safe to do so. This called for a third-party endorsement strategy.

There was also a focus on a public information campaign to break the spiral of silence. The Axios/Ipsos Coronavirus Index finds that while 71% of the population say their local schools have done a very good or good job at managing education during the pandemic and only 10% say they have done a poor job, the overall impression given through media coverage was still negative.

Messaging was also aligned with the FCPS Caring Culture value to encourage an environment where the community is supporting those who need it most.

Timeline

August 23, 2021 through March 1, 2022. This tackled the absence of the critical layered prevention strategy of vaccinations for 5-11 year-olds, the delta and omicron surges, and the period when universal masking was being challenged via the gubernatorial election campaign.

OBJECTIVES

Objective #1: By February 1, 2022, all FCPS parents/guardians will support the continuation of student masking as a preventative measure against COVID-19 until health officials deemed it safe to rollback these measures.
Evaluation: Number of students reported for not wearing masks between August 23, 2021 and March 1, 2022.

Objective #2: By March 1, 2022, all 199 FCPS schools will remain open to in-person learning through the effective implementation of layered prevention strategies.
Evaluation: Number of FCPS schools closed between August 23, 2021 and March 1, 2022.

Objective #3: By March 1, 2022, the community will support efforts to ensure that local school boards have the constitutional right to oversee health and safety decision-making in public schools.
Evaluation: Media messaging carried to the community.
IMPLEMENTATION

Strategy #1: Caring Culture/Empathy Strategy
- Define Caring Culture
- Link to Caring Culture in all key communications
- Create supporting multilingual content with images supporting masking
- Ensure all images and visuals reflect the FCPS strategic plan goal of a Caring Culture

Strategy #2: Proactive Communication Strategy
- Careful tracking of legislative progress to ensure we were always ahead of the communication curve
- Sharing roll back plan ahead of any state action
- Ensure staff and families always received information ahead of the media

Strategy #3: Proactive Media Strategy
- Advance media interviews with embargo
- Providing background information to the media regardless of whether they were writing a story
- Talking points for Board members to respond to questions from constituents/media

Strategy #4: Education/Information Strategy
- Create content for principals to address issues among staff in their schools
- Create FAQ and Talking Points to support School Board communications
- Public information/education strategy to counter the 10%
  - Facebook Live Town Hall
  - Messages from the Superintendent/Division Messages: February 4, 2022, February 10, 2022, February 18, 2022, February 27, 2022, February 28, 2022

Strategy #5: Branding/Visual Strategy
- MaskUp! poster/social media campaign
- Branding of all masking communications
- Alignment of masking branding with other layered prevention strategies including vaccination (VaxUp!)

Strategy #6: Third Party Endorsement Strategy
- While FCPS should capitalize on the national campaign, local messaging needed to be delivered through trusted community health leadership
- Continue emphasis on rollback plan based on local health leader and CDC guidance
- January 24 Facebook Town Hall featured:
  - Trusted school leaders
  - Local pediatrician
  - The Fairfax County Health Department
EVALUATION

Maintaining Masks

Despite all the political turmoil and controversy, through consistent messaging and staying the course, FCPS managed to hold out until the CDC changed their universal mask guidance on Feb 25, 2022. Between March 30, 2021 and March 1, 2022 just 26 students were reported for mask violations. This is .014% of FCPS’ 180,000 students, therefore easily achieving objective #1. A February 22, 2022 Christopher Newport University Poll found that more than half of Virginia parents surveyed believe health data should be used to make masking decisions for schools.

Schools Stay Open

Despite the tremendous impact to the community at large, there was a very low rate of in-school transmission with just 161 cases out of 8,135 COVID-19 positive cases reported to FCPS by students, staff and visitors and defined as epi-linked as of February 9, 2022. That is just 0.08%.

By March 1, 2022 FCPS had zero school closures for the 2021-22 school year, achieving the second objective of the communication plan.

School Board Support

When FCPS initially announced it would be challenging the Governor’s order and keeping the mask requirement until health experts indicated it was safe to do so, 55 stories were carried in news outlets across Virginia and picked up by syndicated publications around the country. All of these articles were factual reports of the legal situation.

21 additional stories regarding mask requirement protests appeared in partisan media outlets, 11 of which pertained to one specific parent who had written multiple social media posts and invited a partisan reporter to join her daily mask protests at the school, feeding the spiral of silence. In fact, between January 25 - February 4, out of more than 179,000 students, only 17 were suspended for refusing to wear a mask.

The Washington Post editorial board provided the ultimate media validation in a January 25 op-ed titled, “Opinion: Youngkin fuels a culture war and puts schools at risk.” In the first School Board meeting following the announcement of the lawsuit (January 27, 2022), six public speakers spoke out in support of the School Board action to maintain universal masking. Three speakers spoke out against masks, two of whom are part of the aforementioned vocal minority.

NEXT STEPS

This campaign sparked the formation of a group of parents who banded together to support public education. This has created a platform for a broader public education campaign going forward. Two groups have since been formed (Student Alliance for Fair Education and 4 Public Education) to support FCPS and public education to dispel the false narrative provided by political parent groups and to speak out for the previously silent majority.
Research showed the vast majority of Virginia residents, health officials and local leaders supported universal mask-wearing from the start of the school year through late February. The 10% was vocal on social media and non-partisan media outlets, but did not represent the silent majority. Certain elements of the media were harnessing this story but the narrative around safety and schools was not being countered in other mainstream media.

Primary Sources

RESEARCH

The main considerations for which families indicated they were likely or highly likely to opt their child out of in-school instruction were the child’s and the family’s physical health and safety, quality of instruction the child would receive, child’s social needs, and child’s mental health needs.
Secondary Sources

Poll: Majority of Virginians support mask mandates

Virginians indicate concern that new COVID-19 variants will lead to a worsening pandemic.

Most Parents Support School Mask mandate

Virginia

Most Parents Support School Mask Mandate

Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2021

West Long Branch, N.J. — Two-thirds of Virginia voters, including parents of school-age children, support the state’s school mask mandate and many support Covid vaccinations for age-eligible children. The Monmouth (“Mon-muth”) University Poll also finds that a majority of voters back

Pediatric COVID-19 Cases in Counties With and Without School Mask Requirements — United States, July 1—September 4, 2021

Weekly / October 1, 2021 / 2021;1377-1378

On September 24, 2021, this report was posted online as an MMWR Early Release.

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t (View author affiliations)

View suggested citation
Yes, Virginia, Schools Will Open Five Days A Week This Fall

By Abi Riedel
Published: July 30, 2021 8:52 am EDT

The Virginia Department of Education has announced that all public schools in Virginia will return to five days a week of in-person learning for the 2021-2022 school year. This decision was made after reviewing the latest data on COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in the state.

How safe is it for kids to go to school during delta?

And 8 other questions families have this fall, answered by experts.

By Abigail硫酸 | Sep 1, 2021, 8:00 am EDT

This fall, millions of families across America are embarking on the most stressful back-to-school season since — well, last year.

It’s not that things aren’t different now. Most notably, we have vaccines available for people 12 and older that dramatically reduce the risk of death and serious illness from the virus. And while larger numbers of students started last school year learning remotely, this fall nearly all districts are welcoming kids back to classrooms.

Number of Cases by Report Date for Virginia for All time

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Virginia Department of Health Announces Significant Increases in Delta Variant in Virginia

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH ANNOUNCES SIGNIFICANT INCREASES IN DELTA VARIANT IN VIRGINIA.

August 6, 2021

Virginia Department of Health Announces Significant Increase in Delta Variant in Virginia

As of today, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) has confirmed a significant increase in the Delta variant of COVID-19 in the state. The Delta variant is a highly transmissible strain of the virus that has been identified as a cause for concern globally.

Weather

Prince George’s County Public Schools shifts to virtual learning due to uptick in COVID cases

All Prince George’s County Public Schools in Maryland will move to virtual learning for the final stretch of the school year and into the first month of 2022 due to an uptick in cases found within the school system, the school system’s CEO announced Friday.
Local Political Environment

I’m not going to let parents come into schools and actually take books out and make their own decision. I don’t think parents should be telling schools what they should teach.

- Terry McAuliffe

When Virginia parents make a statement, that will be heard around the country. It will be heard in every single school district around this great country.

- Glenn Youngkin
I’m not even convinced that what we saw on paper today in their slides is actually what’s going to happen in the fall...what actually happens in August when we open.

- Christy Hudson
Parents and Staff Calls for a Return to Virtual Learning Amid Safety Concerns

Petition calls for virtual option in Fairfax schools pointing to Delta variant concern

In an online petition, some parents are demanding a hybrid model for students in the fall.

Fairfax and Loudoun County parents push for virtual school option as COVID-19 cases rise

FCPS has reported an increasing number of daily student COVID cases since the school year began.

FCPS Virtual School Option

5,017 have signed. Let's get to 7,500!

At 7,500 signatures, this petition is more likely to get a reaction from the decision maker!

Lucas Trejo signed this petition
Aldo Saavedra Amador signed this petition

First name
Last name
Email

Movement: Support Remote Learning and Flexible Grading Policies
IMPLEMENTATION

Consistency and repetition were key to the success of maintaining universal masking in schools, even with the executive order, until health officials deemed it safe to rollback safety measures. This plan focused on developing strong visual support and frequent community outreach, talking points, newsletter content and toolkits for principals to ensure we were speaking with one voice. FCPS worked with local health officials for third party endorsement, including a town hall in both English and Spanish to discuss universal masking. FCPS got ahead of media messaging by working with select news organizations to provide interviews in advance of any major milestones in the litigation process.

Our Caring Culture focus included multilingual communications around the importance of mask wearing to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
Proactive communications included regular letters from the division and the superintendent with updates on school health and safety and masking.

Education and information included toolkits for school-based leaders to share critical information with the community. Town halls were hosted in English and Spanish, getting third party support from local health leaders and physicians.
Proactive media outreach ensured interviews were pre-scheduled and completed with an embargo before seven school systems, including FCPS, announced litigation challenging the Governor’s Executive Order. 15 total pre-interviews were done by the media team. The team also lined up interviews to be ready for the exact time of the announcement of the outcome of the lawsuit.

Fairfax School Board Chair Stella Pekarsky said in an interview Sunday that the lawsuit boils down to an issue of local control: “Can we make policies for our school system, or does the governor get to come and do that for us? Youngkin does not tell us what to do.”
Branding for the campaign was aligned with the VaxUp! brand that FCPS had used successfully for a White House visit and launch of the 5-11 vaccination campaign in early November.

Our design team incorporated students in masks along with the bright colors of the FCPS brand as visuals for newsletters, social media, and the website. This was also the backdrop for media interviews.
EVALUATION

The silent majority spoke up in a survey in late February 2022 supporting FCPS’ stance that masking decisions should be driven by health data.

FCPS garnered third party endorsements from local health and government officials, the Editorial Board of the Washington Post, and the Chair of the Fairfax Board of Supervisors, while community groups formed in support of FCPS and public education.

Our proactive media campaign resulted in neutral headlines and supportive editorials. Only niche media with limited impact towards FCPS parents supported the 10 percent. Student mask refusals were limited and schools remain open.

Maintaining Masks

Between March 30, 2021 and March 1, 2022 just 26 students were reported for mask violations. Media coverage was limited to a handful of students and to niche media with minimal reach.

“A lot of the energy, criticism that’s been happening, it’s not coming from a large chunk of the population. It’s very much a tail-wagging-the-dog scenario.”

- Chris Jackson, Ipsos Senior Vice President
87% of participants in a Superintendent’s Town Hall in late January indicated support for universal masking in FCPS schools.
Schools Stay Open

All schools remained open throughout the school year. Masking was repealed on the School Board’s terms, in line with their legally proven constitutional right to make health and safety decisions for schools, and the CDC change in guidance on March 1, 2022.

CDC relaxes Covid guidance, allowing most people to ditch masks if hospitalizations remain low

Changes to Universal Masking for ALL Set for March 1

Dear FCPS Community and Staff,

Late Friday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released updated health guidance that included new metrics for determining COVID-19 community levels. Based on this new guidance, Fairfax County's current COVID-19 community level is low.

Based on these new metrics and CDC guidance, FCPS will now adjust our roll back plan and allow everyone staff and parents/guardians of FCPS students to make a choice whether or not they will wear a mask starting Tuesday, March 1.

Monday will be a day to prepare for this transition. Students and staff will have the day to get answers to questions and prepare for the change. We will share additional information tomorrow that will help us all prepare.

The decision to wear a mask or not is a personal one for our staff and families, based on many factors. The FCPS community values our Caring Culture, and we will see that value in action as we treat each other with respect and understanding during this transition.

Families, please talk with your children about these upcoming changes so they are prepared for this transition and understand your expectations for them at school.

We are encouraged by the continued decline in COVID-19 cases in our community. However, we are also committed to keeping our schools safe for all to learn and work in person. Please continue to do your part to maintain a healthy environment by monitoring for illness and staying home when sick.

Masking requirements will remain in place after March 1 for Fort Belvoir Elementary School, due to its location on a military base, and HeadStart and Early HeadStart, due to federal requirements.

Please look for more information tomorrow regarding our transition on March 1 to mask optional for all.
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – January 17th, 2022

Virginia Pediatricians strongly recommend children continue to wear masks in school while rates of COVID-19 infection remain high.

The Virginia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (VA-AAP) strongly recommends that school-aged children, regardless of vaccination status, wear a well-fitting face mask while attending school. Any successful comprehensive plan to protect children against the Omicron variant and other future variants of COVID-19 includes being up to date on COVID-19 vaccination and consistent wearing of face masks.

Face masks remain safe and reliable, and children have demonstrated their ability to wear them effectively. In addition to protecting a child, face mask use significantly reduces the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and other respiratory infections, thus keeping schools operational and ensuring children do not miss in person school.

Media Contact:
lmunn@ramdocs.org
http://www.virginiapediatrics.org/media/

We would encourage them, if the statewide mandate goes away, and that easily may occur...that our school districts, particularly as we’re seeing such a large surge in cases, maintain those mask requirements.
- Dr. David Goodfriend, Director of the Loudoun County Health Department

The governor’s contempt for the law is matched by his disdain for Virginia’s constitution, which specifies that “the supervision of schools in each school division shall be vested in a school board.”
- Washington Post Editorial Board
The campaign proactively engaged the media around the School Board’s constitutional role, while staying above the politics. By letting others in the media tell our story for us and share our points of view, FCPS continued to remain largely neutral and continued to act as a public entity that serves all.
From FCPS just now—thanks for standing strong. “Please be aware that we are currently still in high transmission and all of our layered prevention strategies, including universal masking, remain in place.”

Youngkin’s mask order sparks lawsuits, confusion and contention

By Kate Masters/Virginia Mercury  Jan 24, 2022 Updated Feb 2, 2022  4

SUBMIT YOUR NEWS!
We’re always interested in hearing about news in our community. Let us know what’s going on!
Go to form

OPEN FOR BUSINESS
Real-time social media posts from local businesses and organizations across Northern Virginia, powered by Friends2Follow. To add your business to the stream, email friends2follow@residenova.com or click on the green button below.

New group supports public education

Feb. 11, 2022
#Covid, #School Board, #Schools
43

4 Public Education chair Holly Hazard speaks at the Feb. 10 school board meeting.