



# CHRIS KAPENGA

President | Wisconsin State Senate

## **AB 995 Testimony**

Assembly Committee on Education

February 16, 2022

Thank you Chairman Thiesfeldt and committee members for hearing testimony on AB 995 today. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen our local school districts rush in to make overbearing requirements and rules that impedes our children's education and their learning experience. This bill is part of a larger effort to empower parents to make the best decisions for their children.

This bill would simply allow parents to opt their children out of schools who require students to wear masks. All parents would need to do is notify their school district. Parents wouldn't need to explain their reasoning for opting out, nor could their kids be disciplined by the school for opting out.

A similar bill has recently been signed into law in Virginia with bipartisan support, which also included a provision that requires schools to offer full time, in-person learning for students. I feel this is critically important, so we ensured this provision was also included.

I think most of us can agree – parents need to have the head seat at the table when major decisions that affect their kids are involved. School boards shouldn't be able to take away the rights that all parents have, the right to always do what's best for their kids. Government does not know what is best.

Thank you, Chairman Thiesfeldt and committee members, for your time and consideration of this bill. I would also like to thank Speaker Vos for authoring this bill in the Assembly.



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# ROBIN J. VOS

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SPEAKER OF THE WISCONSIN STATE ASSEMBLY

Chairman Thiesfeldt and members of the Assembly Committee on Education,

Thank you for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill 995, which allows parents to opt their children out of school mask mandates and requires schools to offer an in-person learning option for students.

The past two years have taken a serious toll on all of us, but most importantly and more concerning, is the toll it has taken our youth.

During the most formative and developmental years of their lives, our kids have been isolated away from their peers and other loved ones, and they have missed many important opportunities to support their emotional and physical development.

Our kids have suffered the most throughout this pandemic, even though we have known for some time that children are at less risk for developing serious COVID symptoms and complications than any other age group.

In Wisconsin, school aged children with confirmed cases of COVID end up in the hospital less than 1% of the time. This is after Dr. Anthony Fauci acknowledged that many of these hospitalizations of children are hospitalizations with COVID, rather than due to COVID. Nationally, the American Academy of Pediatrics found that only between 0.1 and 1.6 percent of child coronavirus cases result in hospitalization.

At best, the evidence on masking in schools appears to be inconclusive. We do know, however, that the effects of masking and the lack of in-person schooling have been detrimental to many children and their families. Our children are behind in school and their learning, they have missed priceless adolescent moments, sporting events, and other opportunities for growth as an individual that they will never be able to get back.

The Office of Children's Mental Health at the Department of Health Services recently acknowledged the stress the pandemic has caused children in our state and the importance of rebuilding peer connections that have been lost over the past two years. They note, "the pandemic has eroded the positive relationships that are necessary for healthy development," and our youth "now have greater mental health needs, but fewer social connections."

The decisions that are made in schools will impact our children for the rest of their lives and parents deserve to have a say in these decisions about their children's wellbeing. Additionally, parents should be able to rely on the availability of in-person instruction for their kids, especially as they try to balance work and the need to make ends meet for their families during these already difficult times.

Given the lower risk children have in developing severe COVID symptoms, the inconclusive evidence on the benefits of masking in schools, and the harm masking and lack of in-person instruction have caused, now is the time to give parents a choice in these important decisions for their kids. Our children's mental health, wellbeing and learning development are not worth the risk of continuing with the status quo.

Just last week, ten more states dropped their mask mandates. Thanks to this Legislature's successful challenge against Governor Evers' unconstitutional use of emergency powers, we do not have a statewide mask mandate in Wisconsin and only a few remaining municipalities have their own mask mandates still in place, namely Milwaukee, Madison and Racine. Of those remaining, most have indicated they may plan to rescind or let their mandates expire soon. This trend will only continue. It is not fair to our children to have mask mandates dropped for everyone else, but not in our schools, among those least at risk for severe COVID symptoms and most vulnerable to the potential negative effects of consistent masking.

This bill will still allow schools to implement mask mandates, but requires them to also give parents the ability to opt their child out of that mandate. A very similar bill recently passed both houses of the Virginia State Legislature with bipartisan support.

At the end of the day, those parents who want their children to wear a mask should have the option to do so, and the parents who do not want their children to be masked up, should also have the ability to make that choice for their child.

This bill will empower parents to have a say in their children's health, their education, and their treatment in school. A choice that has unfortunately been lacking for many parents and children over the past two years. Please do not further jeopardize our children's ability to learn and develop during these foundational early years. Please support Assembly Bill 995.

Thank you for your consideration.