

**P-05-1017 Allow pupils to wear masks in all areas of the school premises,
Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 22.09.20**

PETITION P-05-1017

21st September 2020

Dear whom it may concern,

Thank you for the response. Throughout the pandemic, the use of face coverings has been a highly debatable topic; with the government changing its advice from 'No evidence the general wearing of face masks by the public who are well affects the spread of the disease' (Jonathan Van Tam, Deputy Chief Medical Officer Professor) to 'Things like wearing a face mask, which reduces the transmission, very clearly' (Matt Hancock, Health Secretary). The Welsh government's latest plea for shoppers to wear face coverings when shopping, and I believe schools across Wales should follow suit and have face coverings in classroom settings as pupils are confined in classrooms together for a long period of time.

The Welsh Government's latest advice is for pupils to wear face coverings in school communal areas, but the use of face covering is still not recommended in classrooms. The messaging laid out is nothing short of chaotic. Currently, I must wear a face covering to buy a pint of milk where 2 meters social distancing is more likely to be observed as well as plastic screens at checkout points. But pupils are not allowed to wear face coverings when in a closed environment of more than 20 people, with no social distancing, and central air conditioning in some classrooms.

The mixed messaging from the Welsh Government creates an impression that people can spread the virus in shops but not in schools. On the other hand, some may argue that children are less at risk compared to adults. Even so, it does not make them any less contagious. This means they can still contract the virus in school and

pass it onto more vulnerable adults that may be in their bubble creating chains of infections that can be hard to break up.

As we move to the autumn/winter season we are likely to experience a spike in other illnesses like Rhinovirus and flu. The use of face coverings can limit the distance that droplets travel during a cough or sneeze, meaning a broader use of them can result in higher attendance rates among pupils as less pupils are off with other illnesses.

In the response from the Minister of Education, she wrote 'The Welsh Government does not explicitly prohibit use of face coverings in classrooms' but there have been cases in Ysgol Friars where pupils are told off for refusing to take off their face coverings in lessons.

I do understand the impact of face coverings on pupils who may have hearing difficulties or those who rely on lip reading as their main source of communication. However, I believe the Welsh Government should NOT use a 'one size fits all' solution when tackling a problem like this, especially in secondary schools where pupils move between blocks of buildings mixing with hundreds of pupils across the school. To this day, the use of face shields as an alternative is still not permitted in many schools across Wales even though it solves all the problems a face covering may cause like speech and lip reading. The benefits of a face shield are that it can block off any potential droplets from other people also droplets produced by the user. Personally, I see this as a solution to any classes that may have pupils who have problems with speech or those who rely on lip reading. should there be no pupils in a particular class that have hearing difficulties or must rely on lip reading, the use of face coverings must remain an option for the pupil.

As the scientific evidence on the use of face coverings grow, I believe the Welsh Government should allow the use of face coverings in classroom settings and make schools to let pupils have a choice on

whether to wear one. Recently, the World Health Organization has advised members of public to “Wear a mask where physical distancing is difficult, such as on public transport, in shops or in other confined or crowded environments” these conditions all fit the description of a classroom.

Even though the Welsh Government have called on schools to reduce classroom size numbers, but many schools are simply unable to do it. Whether its lack of classrooms or lack of teachers. Therefore, the use of face coverings is important as social distancing is near impossible and class sizes remains unchanged.

The Welsh Government should look at our European counterparts (France, Italy, Germany, and Spain) where widespread face covering use in schools have resulted in safer schools. Even in countries like the Netherlands where the use of face coverings in classroom settings are not compulsory, there is no advice saying it is “not recommended” or there are no schools telling pupils off for wearing one in classrooms.

Finally, I have some further questions for the First Minister of Wales, Minister of Education and the petitions committee

- Since neither social distancing nor face coverings are existent in **classrooms across Wales**, what makes you so sure schools are ‘COVID Secure’?
- The latest figures show that 1 in 5 pupils in Wales were absent in the first week of school, do you think this is down to parents thinking that schools are not safe?

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Zhao', with a stylized, flowing script.

JOHN ZHAO