

“It's time for Governor McKee to show leadership on mandating masks in schools”

McGowan, Dan. Boston Globe (Online); **Boston**. 17 Aug 2021.

There's one thing that politicians and journalists have in common: We both hate being second or third or seventh on anything.

For those in the media, we'd much rather poke holes in our competitors' stories than admit we got scooped. For elected officials like Governor Dan McKee, there's nothing worse than having to acknowledge that someone else, especially a potential political opponent, might actually have a good idea. The difference is that I'm not hurting anyone when I pretend that I didn't read the Providence Journal this morning.

But ignoring calls from many other politicians, including Democratic gubernatorial rivals Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea and state Treasurer Seth Magaziner, to issue a statewide mask mandate for all public schools could be harmful to public health.

And it's completely unnecessary.

McKee fully supports masks in schools. That's why Providence, the 24,000-student district controlled by the state, is requiring facial coverings for everyone when school reopens next month. It's why he reiterated once again on Tuesday that he strongly recommends that every district adopt a mask policy. He even sounded pretty sensible in making the case to parents who might not want their children to mask up, essentially arguing that there are virtually no consequences to wearing masks and potentially dire ones if the virus spreads because children aren't wearing masks.

“If you're right that somehow you don't know need masks to keep kids safe, what's the worst that could happen if they mask their kids?” he said. “But what's the worst that could happen if CDC guidance is correct, if our Department of Health guidance is correct? That actually our kids are at risk if they don't wear a mask. What's the worst that could happen? Just think about that.”

Follow your own advice, governor, and think about this: What's the worst that could happen if you fail to issue a statewide school mask mandate?

I can tell you: Sick kids and sick employees. Look at the Hillsborough County school district in Florida, which includes Tampa. Its mask “requirement” wasn't really a mandate because it let parents opt out for no reason, and nearly 28,000 did just that. And within a week after school started, 804 students and 437 employees got infected, and now 5,599 students and 316 employees are in isolation or quarantine either because they got infected or were exposed to someone who was.

Sure, the Hillsborough County school district is huge. But are you okay with a similar proportion of kids and staffers getting sick in a Rhode Island school district where masks are optional?

During his weekly press conference, McKee said that nearly 100,000 students in the state will attend school in a district that has a mask mandate in place. That means that 40,000 students live in districts without such a requirement.

McKee stressed that there are still three weeks until most districts reopen, which gives them more than enough time to adopt mask policies. **But what happens if a few school systems don't implement a requirement? Or what about places like Johnston, where the school committee voted last week to make masks optional?**

McKee said he'd rather not be heavy-handed with school systems, and offered praise for the majority of districts who are issuing mask mandates. He said the state is exploring its legal options and he might have more to say on Thursday when he holds another press briefing on COVID-19 cases.

On Tuesday, Rhode Island was up to 187.1 cases per 100,000 residents over the last seven days, the highest rate since April 24. By comparison, on Aug. 17, 2020, when teachers and parents across the state were questioning how schools could possibly reopen, the state was at 58.9 cases per 100,000 residents.

We have all learned to live with COVID-19 a little better this year, and McKee is right that Rhode Island has **one of the best vaccination rates in the country**. He deserves a lot of credit for that, and he's completely right to be pushing for all students to be in classrooms (as opposed to virtual learning) when schools reopen.

But a statewide mask policy is one thing the state can do to ensure that schools are safer on day one. And it takes the pressure off reluctant school committees (whose members face re-election next year) from having to deal with a few angry parents who appear to have no interest in science.

“This is not the time to be injecting politics into this conversation,” McKee said during his press conference. But he was the one who brought up politics countless times on Tuesday, referring to unnamed critics, a group of General Assembly members, and the teachers’ unions, who all want a clear policy on masks. Even the state Council on Elementary and Secondary Education stepped up on Tuesday to tell the Department of Education to reject school reopening plans that don’t have mask mandates.

It stinks for McKee that he's the lone holdout of the likely candidates for governor next year when it comes to calling for a statewide mask mandate. But he's also the only one who actually has the power to execute this kind of requirement. No one is going to remember who was first.

Maybe he can get away with his “let the locals decide” approach if every school committee in the state begins to show a little common sense.

Or maybe he should learn what every editor has ever told a journalist upset over being scooped by a competitor.

It's much more important to be right than to be first.