

*Masks in Schools: A Back-to-School Update*  
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Newark Street Elementary School in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, which required masks last year in certain classrooms and settings, has assured families that it will not be requiring masks again this year.

While this news is reassuring to some, the school still appears to be completely unaware of their responsibility to protect those in its care, as their newsletter chillingly explains:

*“The overwhelming majority of this community masked without complaints and without questions. Many of you did this with compassion and without having comprehension of why. Compassion without comprehension might be one of the strongest mindsets of humanity. And so many of you found your way to that place. I am in awe of those who did.”*

- Newark Street School Newsletter, *Newt Newsletter*, August, 2023

It is truly awe-inspiring that this is the role schools are proud to play now: encouraging students to “find their way to a place” where they are able to silently suffer, and remain in ignorance.

Ignorance is ignoring one’s legal and moral responsibility. There are several risk factors and hazards to consider when one restricts breathing and covers the face. In this case, it is crucial that anybody who is wearing a respirator, such as an N95 or dustmask, is properly supervised, and there are numerous regulations in place to protect workers who wear them.

As the CDC explains to employers:

*“Supervisors and hospital management can minimize the physiological burden of PPE [N95’s and other respiratory protection] by instituting policies and procedures to assure breaks for [health care workers], encouraging front-line supervisors to check in regularly with staff to assess for symptoms or concerns, and providing a mechanism to report symptoms immediately and without fear of penalty.”*

-Centers for Disease Control’s National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health: [The Physiological Burden of Prolonged PPE Use on Healthcare Workers during Long Shifts](#)

Providing proper supervision is a crucial part of the [OSHA regulations](#), whether the use is voluntary or not. Proper supervision includes paying careful attention to the symptoms, such as difficulty breathing, chest and stomach pain, tingling and dizziness, and the supervisor’s skill, and willingness, to address those issues immediately.

School administrators have been hearing these very same [complaints](#) from students and staff required to wear face masks all throughout the past three years. We have evidence that as soon as students returned to school in the fall of 2020, at least one student in the state went to the [emergency room to receive treatment](#) for harm caused by wearing masks at school, kitchen staff were complaining of difficulty breathing, and students and staff were withdrawing from school due to the mask requirements.

## ***The Feds are Coming, the Feds are Coming!***

In the spring of 2022 Vermont's governor, Health Commissioner, and the Secretary of Education advised schools in the state to drop their school mask requirements, citing [student mental health](#) and [communication concerns](#).

Most schools happily complied, as smiling faces finally breathed freely in classrooms across the state. However, a couple of schools chose to continue enforcing mask requirements, and that spring Secretary French sent an email to one of the principals encouraging them to listen to the health department's advice.

French's email to the principal [made it into the hands of the mainstream press](#), and apparently the Feds heard about it...

While the Federal government seems completely uninterested in the fact that [OSHA standards](#) are being ignored, that [children are complaining that they can't breathe](#) under their masks, that "[every mask you've ever seen on a child is unregulated, untested, and unsafe](#)" and Vermont's Agency of Education has admitted they have no evidence masks are safe on which to base their policy, evidently their ears did perk up when they heard about what Secretary French told that school.

This fall the U.S. Department of Education decided to investigate Vermont's education secretary for discouraging the use of masks.

It is clear that "suggestions" and "investigations" by the federal government are not legally binding. However, the story of French's email and the ensuing federal investigation were echoed across [VT Digger](#) and the [nightly news](#), making the message loud and clear to school boards across the state:

*"Watch Out! If you stand in the way of mask mandates in your schools, the Feds will get you!"*

Everyone knows what that means. Think of all that federal funding your school gets, especially special education funding, which these new mask requirements are based on. Schools are meant to feel like they have no choice but to comply with the masking and "other protection measures" going forward, or else risk "being investigated."

How much influence the feds have in our state, compared with families, students, and teachers who simply need to breathe, is up to us.

Why are we not providing proper supervision to children and vulnerable adults in schools and other community settings? Why, instead, do we seem to be [penalizing those who complain](#) and praising those who don't? Why has this yet to become an agenda item, and a public conversation allowed at any level of state government?

First we have to acknowledge that asking children not to complain when they are hurting, and criticizing parents for asking questions, is a recipe for disaster- not compassion.

We also need to stand by Secretary French, the Vermont Agency of Education, and our local school boards when they decide to protect students, and acknowledge the harms of masking.

A transparent cost/benefit analysis of the harms and benefits of masking needs to be put on the agenda for discussion at the local and state level. Allowing the discussion will provide the support that these decision-makers need to justify their concerns about masking, and acknowledges those who are suffering an unknown amount of harm- and told to keep quiet about it.