

Support for Mask and Vaccine Policies in Schools Falls along Racial and Political Lines

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Dan Silver, Michael Fienberg, and Morgan Polikoff
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As the omicron variant roils school reopening plans, local educational leaders are again faced with tough decisions about COVID-19 policy. Do they open for in-person learning in the face of the omicron wave? What happens if too many teachers or students have COVID-19 to safely open? What policies around masking should be required for schools operating in person? And should they consider vaccination or booster requirements for teachers or students?

Some of these questions can be answered in part by science—evidence is overwhelming that full vaccination including a booster shot offers extremely high levels of effectiveness against the currently circulating strains, so of course we should do everything possible to encourage vaccination.¹ The evidence on masking for children in school is more ambiguous, but government agencies recommend wearing high-quality masks to reduce transmission of the virus.² But both claims ignore the persistent political divisions that govern common COVID-19 protocols.³ People on the left tend to argue for stronger mandates of health and safety protocols in schools, while those on the right tend to argue that such mandates infringe on important personal freedoms for teachers and students. In short, both during the omicron wave and after it ebbs, the partisan divide over COVID-19 mitigation strategies like masking and vaccination ensures that any attempt to enforce these strategies will be politically fraught, at least for the near future. And politics matters, regardless of what the science says.

Our research team analyzed data from the Understanding America Study, a nationally representative panel of US households administered by the University of Southern California Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research, to gain insight into parents' positions on various masking and vaccine policies available to educational decisionmakers.⁴ Specifically, we asked a nationally representative sample of approximately 1,500 parents of K–12 students in October 2021 (before omicron but during the long-lasting fall delta wave) the extent to which they support (1) mask mandates for all unvaccinated students and teachers, (2) mask mandates for all students and teachers, (3) vaccine mandates for all teachers, (4) vaccine mandates for students 12 and older, and (5) vaccine mandates for

¹ “Booster Shots and Omicron: What to Know About Efficacy, Eligibility and More,” NBC Chicago, last updated January 3, 2022, <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/coronavirus/booster-shots-and-omicron-what-to-know-about-efficacy-eligibility-and-more/2719975/>.

² Matt Barnum, “What We Know About Masks, Students, and COVID Spread: A Chalkbeat Guide,” *Chalkbeat*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/8/26/22643549/covid-masks-schools-research>.

³ Dominick Mastrangelo, “Opposition to Vaccine, Mask Mandates Mainly Limited to Republicans: Poll,” *The Hill*, August 11, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/public-global-health/567295-opposition-to-vaccine-mask-mandates-mainly-limited-to>.

⁴ “Understanding America Study Education Project,” USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research, accessed January 7, 2022, <https://uasdata.usc.edu/index.php>.

all students. In reporting here, we treat parents who “support” or “strongly support” a policy as in support and parents who “oppose” or “strongly oppose” a policy as not in support.

Overall, mask mandates had wider support than vaccine mandates, with 60 percent of US parents supporting universal mask mandates in schools and 64 percent supporting mask mandates in schools for the unvaccinated, compared with 50 percent supporting teacher vaccine mandates, 43 percent supporting vaccine mandates for students 12 and older, and only 38 percent supporting vaccine mandates for all students. (At the time of this survey, vaccines were not yet approved for children ages 5 to 11, so results could have evolved after those approvals were granted.) These findings are disappointing from a public health perspective, as vaccinations are far more effective at combatting COVID-19 than masks are.⁵ Although the survey was not set up to determine exactly why these divides exist, research suggests that US vaccine hesitancy is mainly tied to people’s concerns about vaccine side effects and to the belief that they do not need the vaccine because, for example, they do not believe COVID-19 is a serious illness.⁶ Each of these common reasons for vaccine hesitancy has been a frequent subject of political punditry throughout the pandemic.

Unequal pandemic experiences along racial and ethnic lines have also been widely reported, with some arguing that current vaccine hesitancy among people of color can be traced back to these groups’ historic mistreatment in the US medical system.⁷ Contrary to these arguments, we found that white parents supported each COVID-19 mitigation policy at lower rates than parents of color. Only 56 percent of white parents supported mask mandates for unvaccinated students and teachers, compared with 72 percent of Hispanic, 76 percent of Black, and 87 percent of Asian parents.⁸ Similar patterns held for the other mask and vaccine policies we asked about, with racial gaps commonly exceeding 15 percentage points. Mask mandates held majority support among all groups (except a universal mandate among white parents, which 48 percent supported), and vaccine mandates for teachers and students 12 and older had majority support among Asian, Black, and Hispanic groups, suggesting these policies might be particularly tenable compared with vaccine mandates for all students, especially in areas with lower white populations. However, it only takes a few angry parents who oppose mask or vaccine requirements to make things unpleasant for education leaders trying to implement these policies. The findings also suggest that proponents of these policies may have the most to gain from outreach specifically to white parents, because support for masking and vaccine policies in schools is currently lowest for this group.

⁵ Monica Gandhi, “The Science Is Clear: Masks Worked, but Vaccinated People Don’t Need Them Now,” *Washington Post*, May 18, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/05/18/vaccines-no-masks-cdc/>.

⁶ “COVID Behaviors Dashboard,” Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, accessed January 7, 2022, <https://covidbehaviors.org/>.

⁷ “Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last updated November 30, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>; and Katherine Kricorian and Karin Turner, “COVID-19 Vaccine Acceptance and Beliefs among Black and Hispanic Americans,” *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 8 (August 2021): e0256122, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0256122>.

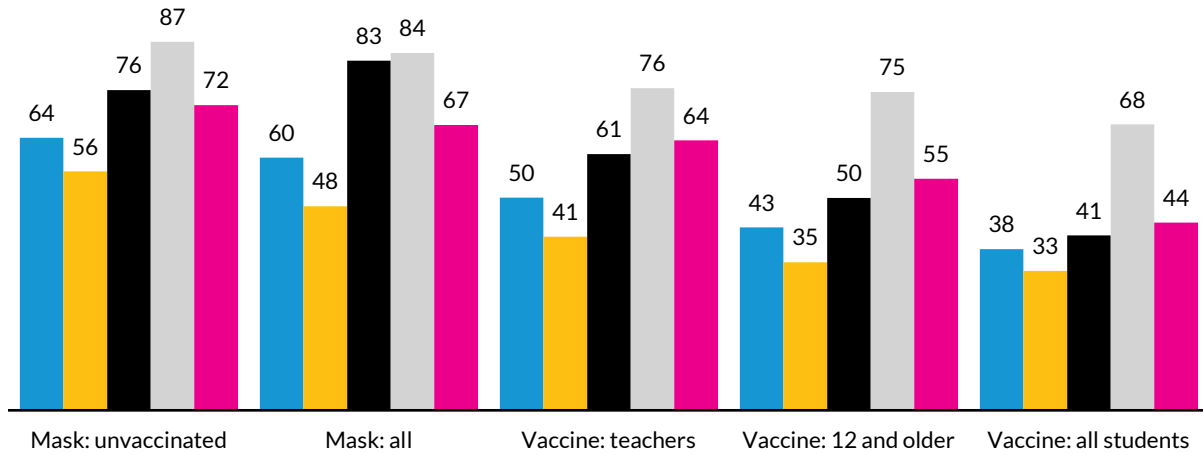
⁸ Following the terminology in the data analyzed, this essay uses the term “Hispanic” to describe people of Latin American descent. The authors acknowledge this may not be the preferred identifier, and we remain committed to employing inclusive language whenever possible.

FIGURE 1

US Parents' Support for Mask and Vaccine Mandates, by Race/Ethnicity

Overall NH white NH Black NH Asian Hispanic

US Parents in Support (%)



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Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Understanding America Study, a nationally representative panel of US households administered by the University of Southern California Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research.

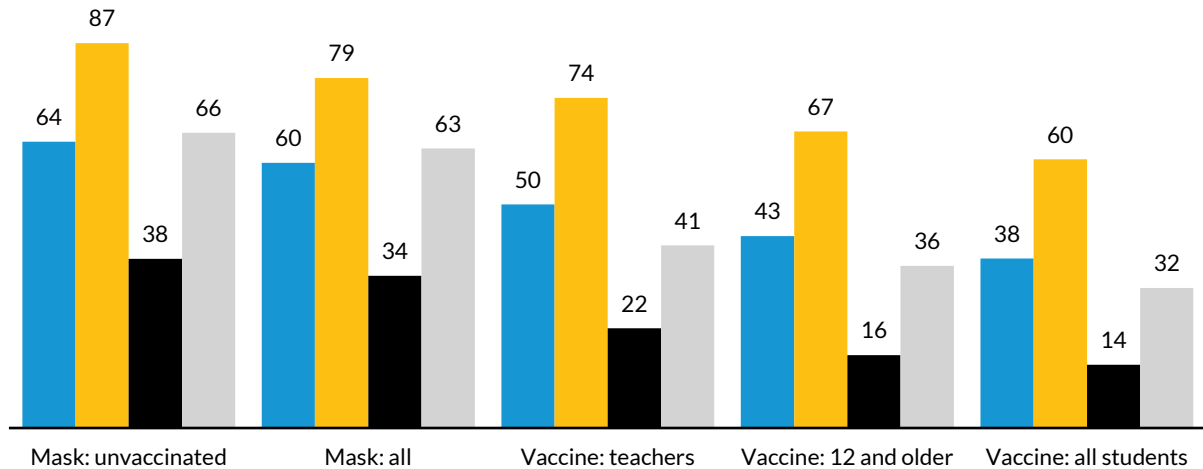
Note: NH = non-Hispanic.

FIGURE 2

US Parents' Support for Mask and Vaccine Mandates, by Political Identification

Overall Democrat Republican Neither

US Parents in Support (%)



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Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Understanding America Study, a nationally representative panel of US households administered by the University of Southern California Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research.

Perhaps to the dismay of the medical community, any discussion of mask and vaccine policy in schools must account for political affiliation, especially because school board meetings have become proxy battlegrounds for larger political fights.⁹ Although the racial differences described above persisted, even controlling for political alignment, we found that political identity was an even stronger predictor of parents' support for school masking and vaccine policies than race and ethnicity. Every mask and vaccine policy in the survey enjoyed majority support among Democrats, but none did among Republicans, with the share of Democrats in support of any given policy two to four times the share of Republicans in support.

For both political groups, mask mandates were more widely supported than vaccine mandates, but the difference was more pronounced among Republicans, where vaccine mandates were supported by vanishingly small shares of parents (22 percent or less). Among parents who identified as neither Democrat nor Republican, mask mandates had majority support but vaccine mandates did not.

Given these survey findings, educational decisionmakers in areas that aren't majority Republican should feel relatively comfortable issuing mask mandates but be prepared for substantial pushback against vaccine mandates (perhaps a major reason why many places issuing vaccine mandates for teachers or students have stalled out or rolled them back as the deadline has drawn near).¹⁰ Given the extremely low rates of support for these policies among Republicans, public health advocates might focus resources on convincing Republicans of the value of vaccination—a successful campaign among Republicans could yield more vaccinations than among any other group.

Parents are an essential stakeholder group to consider when designing and enacting school policy. We find majority support among US parents for masking in schools but not for vaccine mandates. Support among white parents for any of the mask or vaccine policies we asked about is lower than among parents of color. Unfortunately, we found political identification was the strongest predictor of support for these policies, with 60 to 87 percent of Democrats in support of each policy compared with 14 to 38 of Republicans. Until these policies become less politically divisive, it seems likely that COVID-19 mitigation efforts will continue to be a contentious issue in schools.

Dan Silver is a PhD candidate in the University of Southern California's urban education policy program. He focuses on K-12 curriculum policy and parental engagement in schools.

Michael Fienberg is a PhD student in the University of Southern California's urban education policy program, where he focuses on K-12 policy issues.

Morgan Polikoff, PhD, is an associate professor of education policy at the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education.

⁹ Campbell Robertson, interview with Michael Barbaro, "The School Board Wars, Part 1," *The Daily* (podcast), November 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/16/podcasts/the-daily/school-boards-mask-mandates-crt-bucks-county.html?>

¹⁰ Matt Barnum, "Delayed, Diluted, or Nonexistent: Vaccine Mandates for School Staff Stall Out," *Chalkbeat*, last updated November 3, 2021, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/11/2/22760154/schools-teachers-vaccine-mandates>; and Erin Richards, "Los Angeles Schools, with 30K Unvaccinated Students, Push Off COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate until Fall 2022," *USA Today*, last updated December 15, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2021/12/14/los-angeles-schools-student-vaccine-mandate/6509521001/>.

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