

Buncombe County Schools Guidelines Regarding Face-Coverings

The North Carolina General Assembly has mandated that all school districts must be in compliance with “all required COVID-19 guidance related to the operation of elementary and secondary schools issued by the State Board of Education, the Department of Public Instruction and the Department of Health and Human Services.” (2020 SL 49).

Therefore, Buncombe County Schools will comply with the core language noted in the StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit (K-12) (page 5): Face coverings must be worn by all students from kindergarten through 12th grade, and all teachers, staff and adult visitors on buses or other school transportation vehicles, inside school buildings and anywhere on school grounds including outside.

Buncombe County Schools will provide training materials for students and parents. Students will be educated on the reasons for, and proper use of, face coverings. Parents will be encouraged to re-enforce this information at home.

Rationale for face coverings?

COVID-19 is mostly spread by respiratory droplets released when people talk, cough, or sneeze. Face coverings are meant to protect other people in case the wearer is unknowingly infected but does not have symptoms. According to the Office for National Statistics as many as 80% of infected persons may be asymptomatic and recent studies have found a substantial decrease in the likelihood of infection because of wearing face coverings. Face coverings are fully endorsed by the CDC and NCDHHS.

Face coverings may be challenging for students to wear all-day and in all settings such as schools, but they are most essential in times when physical distancing is difficult, such as during movements in hallways and during transportation. To reduce the spread of COVID-19, the CDC recommends people wear face coverings in public settings, and the Buncombe County School Board voted to require the Superintendent to implement procedure to make face coverings mandatory for the protection of all students and staff.

What is a “face covering”?

A face covering is a covering of the nose and mouth that is secured to the head with ties, straps, or loops over the ears or is simply wrapped around the lower face. A face covering can be made of a variety of synthetic and natural fabrics, including cotton, silk, or linen. A covering that contains a transparent clear panel is an acceptable form of covering that may accommodate a variety of communication needs.

Face shields may be used in conjunction with a primary covering over the nose and mouth. Current evidence shows that while a face shield can protect the wearer from infection, there is no evidence at this time that a face shield worn by itself prevents the wearer from spreading infection to others. Therefore, the CDC does not recommend face shields as replacements for face coverings.

Clear face masks can be utilized in situations where visualization of the mouth is important (e.g., for staff working with young students who are learning pronunciation, students for whom English is a second language, individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, or those with behavioral concerns). If a clear face mask is unavailable and needed for one of these situations, or something similar, use of a face shield by itself may be allowable. An exception to the combination of face shield and covering for nose and mouth must be approved from a district level administrator in advance of working while wearing a face shield by itself. The face shield, if approved, must wrap around the sides of the wearer's face and extend to below the chin.

(Note: Per health care professionals: surgical masks, procedure masks, and N95 respirators are not recommended for general public use or use in community settings, as these should be reserved for specific high-risk occupational settings, healthcare providers and other medical first responders in a health care setting).

Are there exceptions to wearing face coverings?

Yes. All of the following must be approved by the school's building level administrator or supervisor. Students, employees and visitors may not be required to wear a face covering if they:

- Have a documented medical or functional behavioral issue, such as a disability, in which they cannot tolerate a face covering due to the medical or functional behavioral issue. The parent/guardian of a student that cannot wear a face covering due to a medical or functional behavioral issue should obtain any necessary documentation from their health care provider and notify the building level administrator immediately for consultation regarding an acceptable accommodation;
- Are actively eating or drinking;
- Are strenuously exercising and able to maintain 6-foot or greater distancing from other people;
- Are seeking to communicate with someone who is hearing-impaired in a way that requires the mouth to be visible;
- Are giving a speech to an audience;
- Would be at risk from wearing a face covering at work, as determined by local, state, or federal regulations or workplace safety guidelines; or
- Have found their face covering is impeding visibility to operate equipment or a vehicle;
- Have the permission of the classroom teacher and/or building-level administrator during scheduled breaks not to exceed 10 consecutive minutes in length to allow removal of face coverings when social distancing requirements can be consistently maintained. For example, when people are stationary, consistently six or more feet apart, and refrain from extended conversation or producing high volume sound.

What is not considered a reason for an exemption and who will enforce the procedure?

The Buncombe County Board of Education has mandated procedure to enforce the use of face coverings for all students and adults. A philosophical and/or political disagreement with the wearing of face coverings is not a recognized exception. Employees, visitors, and students who simply refuse to comply will be subject to normal trespass and/or disciplinary measures

applicable to other reasonable directives and expectations from the Board of Education. The first instance of non-compliance will result in a conference with the building-level administrator or supervisor (the conference may be by phone or virtual). The second instance of non-compliance will be considered a minor infraction and the third shall be considered a major infraction. Refusal or defiance to wear a face covering, without an approved exemption from the building level administrator or supervisor, will be considered an act of insubordination and can result in disciplinary actions leading to removal from the campus.

How will the face coverings rule be enforced for preschool and elementary aged children?

The CDC recognizes that preschool and elementary aged children may have difficulty wearing face coverings properly at all times. In addition, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a “higher-priority strategy” to identify instances when the use of face coverings is critical to stop the spread of COVID-19.

The enforcement of the face covering rule for preschool and elementary aged children will be addressed primarily through education prior to consideration as a discipline infraction.

Who should I contact if I believe I, or my child, meet an exemption?

Parents with questions about the procedure relative to their child should contact the school’s building level administrator.

Employees with questions about the procedure should contact:

Ms. Kim Fisher
Director of Human Resources
Buncombe County Schools
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(828) 23-4233