

Dear Dr. Bearden:

I would like to start by explaining that I fully empathize with the extremely challenging and polarizing climate you are attempting to navigate. You have been tasked with interpreting a deluge of mixed messages, executive orders and policy to make the best decisions for the employees and students in your district. I don't envy you one bit. As you mentioned, you will never make everyone happy. This is true about almost everything. However, with regard to the mitigation of an international pandemic, a public health crisis, I'm not sure that anyone is going to be particularly happy. These are extremely stressful, unprecedented times, and what we need, above all else, is transparency and a strong message either way. Preferably, one in alignment with medical science and public safety. The purpose of this letter is to share concerns and open questions from a group of parents, educators and students.

We are struggling with conflicting or incomplete messaging from the district regarding mask usage and other protective measures. Many parents have been communicating, trying to fill in the gaps and help one another answer questions so that we can make the best decisions for our families going forward. We appreciate the time and effort that has gone into the virtual town halls, FAQs and other methods of communication from your office. You all have answered many of our questions, and we appreciate the options that have been offered. However, there are still quite a few unanswered questions and concerns. Based on the community survey results,  $\frac{1}{3}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the community is "not at all comfortable" with returning to in-person learning within the current district guidelines. A large group of us have come together and decided that it would be more effective to consolidate these questions and concerns into one document. I will organize these concerns into two separate groups: Student/Parent Questions and Forsyth County Employee Questions. Before I start, I will address the concern that is shared by all members of the community - parents, students and employees alike. That concern is the district's policy on mask usage as we enter into this school year.

As I am sure that you are well aware, there was considerable distress and confusion when the first reopening draft was released, outlining that students and faculty could choose to wear face masks, but that it was optional. It was further emphasized that neither the district nor the county would be providing any masks. While I am completely aware of the multi million dollar deficit the district is facing, I was disappointed with that emphasis. If the primary reason for the current mask policy is budget driven, I believe that we could certainly community source enough masks for each child and staff member (*who needs them*) to have 2 or 3. Our group is ready to take on that funding drive if it is the only thing holding you back from making masks mandatory this fall. Unfortunately, I am getting the impression that your decision is not solely based on budget.

During dialogue with the Board of Education at the July 9th meeting to vote on the reopening guidelines, you made it abundantly clear that you believe in the science associated with mask usage, and that you feel that wearing masks is one of the best tools we have right now to mitigate the spread of this virus. As we seem to be on the same page here, I will abstain from providing documentation supporting this mitigation tool, and defer to the simplified concept of

mask usage: *I wear mine to protect you, and you wear yours to protect me.* As we have been informed by multiple experts, this approach is only successful with majority compliance (*80% or higher*). Unfortunately, the simplest and most effective tool that we have in an open economy, wearing masks, has been politicized to the point of absurdity. As you mentioned, you have been contacted by many parents on both sides of the issue. I'm sorry that this is even an issue that you have to mediate. Mask usage has been scientifically proven to be effective in lowering the spread of respiratory borne illness. In a time of great uncertainty, it makes rational sense to err on the side of caution and minor inconvenience rather than taking no precautions whatsoever. While I understand that there are some medical exceptions to mask wearing, they are very few. In addition, masks are probably difficult for some students with high anxiety and special needs as well. My question is why aren't these exemptions being handled on an individual, case-by-case basis? You have a 47 year old law at your disposal to both accommodate those exemptions and protect those students from discrimination. I understand that there is a process for obtaining a 504. However, is there a chance that they could be fast tracked for the students who are truly unable to wear a mask for any of the reasons stated above? Allowing parents and students to opt out of a solution, that is being strongly recommended by public health experts world-wide, is setting a bad precedent for many reasons. Our students and teachers need leadership. They need to know that their health and safety are not to be compromised. I implore you, on behalf of thousands of other parents, students and employees of this district, to please reconsider your position on masks going forward. Indoor interaction is the absolute highest risk factor in community spread, and masks (*used in tandem with proper hygiene and social distancing*) are the only tool we have to mitigate that.

### **Parent/Student Questions & Concerns:**

The following questions and concerns have been voiced by non-faculty members of the community; the majority have come from parents and students in the district, but also from grandparents, other family members and neighbors.

1. How are the schools prepared to deal with the bullying and aggression surrounding the mask debate? With such strong feelings on either side, it is the idea that they will transfer from the parents to the students.
2. If a student is uncomfortable sitting next to a peer who will not wear a mask and/or being in a classroom with a teacher who will not wear a mask, how will this be handled? This is a concern raised by many in the community. If an individual has been wearing a mask, they likely understand the science behind it - that they are protecting others. It is a valid concern that they will not feel protected while in close proximity to other individuals who are not wearing a mask. Likewise, parents who do not want their children to wear masks are concerned about segregation. Expecting mask usage while putting these kids together (*those wearing them and those not wearing them*) is bound to create a great deal of anxiety and mistrust.

3. Although it seems that most classes can be accommodated through a hybrid blend of Forsyth Virtual Academy and in person instruction, many have asked why we can't use the technology already available for students at home to log into live classes. They could learn along with their peers and easily adapt right back into the classroom setting once the risk has lowered. There are still a few gaps, and many families are not comfortable with sending their children to a brick and mortar school at all right now. If any pathway teachers are willing to teach virtually in tandem with in-person, will they be permitted to do so?
4. How and where will symptomatic students at school be isolated? Is there a dedicated room, separate from the nurse's office? If they are exhibiting clear symptoms (*fever, cough, etc.*), will they be required to wear a mask while they wait for a parent to pick them up?
5. If a student or staff member tests positive (*or leaves school due to symptoms*), will parents of other children in that classroom be notified on the same day? The guidelines state that DPH will contact families directly, and that letters will be sent home. I am just looking for clarification on a timeline for that.
6. The opening guidelines for FCS defer to the Georgia DPH for instructions on when to quarantine and for how long before returning to school. Can those specific guidelines be included in the official FCS guidelines for easier reference and continuity?
7. In addition to posted signage, will there be public health education provided to students and staff on proper mask usage and hygiene?
8. Is there a plan in place on what to do if a student or parent actively resists or interferes with COVID-19 mitigation? (*Refuses to wash hands, or coughs or sneezes, intentionally, on another person*).

### **FCS Teachers & Employees Questions & Concerns:**

1. Are FCS teachers and other employees eligible for Emergency Paid Sick Leave under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act? Other states have reported that it does, but there is no clear information about how the FFCRA has been interpreted in Georgia, and whether teachers and other public employees are covered. According to the information provided by the U.S. Department of Labor (<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/pandemic/ffcra-employer-paid-leave>), the paid sick leave and expanded family and medical leave provisions of the FFCRA apply to certain public employers, and private employers with fewer than 500 employees. PAGE has advised that "certain public employers" includes the public school systems. However, educators around the county have not received a consistent message about this. If it does apply, it will provide an additional 2 weeks (*80 hours*) of paid sick leave if an FCS employee contracts COVID-19 or must quarantine as a result of exposure. Employees of FCS would also like further clarification on sick leave policy in the event of repeat exposure.

2. Will the requirement for substitute teachers to be certified (*in the event of a 2 week or more absence*) remain in place, or will it be waived during the pandemic?
3. If a teacher is quarantined due to exposure, but is not sick, will they be required to use sick days or will they teach remotely through ItsLearning?
4. Will COVID-19 infections caused by exposure while working be eligible for workers compensation?
5. Is the county providing/installing safety barriers in the offices or classrooms (*ie: plexiglass*)?
6. Can individual teachers or staff request/require that anyone who enters their office or classroom wear a mask, specifically when 6 foot social distancing is not possible? High risk individuals are extremely concerned about being in close contact with individuals who will not wear a mask.
7. Is it possible for a teacher or other FCS employee to request a virtual assignment? Or is FMLA (*or resignation*) the only option available to FCS employee's who do not feel comfortable teaching in person at this time?
8. Are staff and students purely self monitoring symptoms?
9. Do we have additional resources and tools to help students from falling behind when they are sick and/or quarantined?

As I am not an employee of FCS, I am aware that I am not privy to the information requested above with regard to teachers and employees. However, many employees in the district have asked these questions, yet still not received clear and cohesive answers. It would make preparation for an extremely challenging school year much easier if they were provided with all of this information as quickly as possible. We are expecting them to enter a fairly stressful and unknown environment in just a few short weeks. As front line employees, they need to know that their health and safety won't be compromised

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. We hope to hear from you soon to address these questions and concerns. I'm sure that you understand the urgency in this matter, as most of us need this information in order to make the best informed decisions for our families.

Sincerely,  
Michelle Pounds