

Virginia's Republican Governor signs law banning school mask mandates with bipartisan support

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18 February 2022

We encourage all Virginia educators, parents and students to attend the next Southeast Educators Rank and File Committee meeting on Sunday, February 20 at 3:00 p.m. EST. Click here to register.

On Wednesday, Virginia's Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin signed Senate Bill (SB) 739 into law after it passed the state's legislature. The law bans the state's municipal school boards from issuing mask mandates in public education.

"Today we are restoring power back to parents," said the governor from the lawn of the state Capitol in Richmond. Youngkin inserted an "emergency clause" into the law which enables it to go into effect March 1 rather than in six months, as most of the state's laws do.

The sweeping ban goes beyond the directives of Democratic Party-run states, which have also dropped statewide masking requirements in recent weeks. According to the *Washington Post*, "In those states... localities continue to have the option of requiring masks in schools," whereas "Virginia's new law goes a step further." The present law gives parents "the right to opt out—effectively making any mandate unenforceable."

The passage of the law through the state Senate and House relied on the critical support of Virginia's Democratic Party. The passage of the bill through the Democrat-controlled state senate last week relied on the support of 19 Republican senators and three Democrats. Democratic Senator Chap Peterson from Fairfax City in the liberal enclave of Northern Virginia supported the measure, claiming that dropping case numbers statewide meant masking policies were no longer justified.

The absurdity of this claim is exposed as soon as one consults the actual statewide coronavirus data. According to the state department of health, daily COVID-19 cases have fallen from nearly 20,000 a day last month to around 4,000.

The rapid drop off, still hovering at levels seen last fall, is attributable mainly to the distribution of personal home tests. According to WAVY, "As free COVID-19 tests from the federal government begin arriving in mailboxes across Virginia and North Carolina, lines at community testing sites are getting shorter."

While the free kits are "good news for those seeking tests," they are "bad news for number-crunchers. Tests taken at home can be reported to the state, but often are not."

State Democrats' efforts to forestall the law from taking effect next month on procedural grounds were even thwarted. Republicans passed the bill with the amended "emergency clause" without a supermajority, citing "rules changes enacted under Democratic leadership in the past two years" allowing for a simple majority, wrote the *Post*.

The bill's passage with critical Democratic Party support mirrors national developments. Phil Murphy, Democratic governor of New Jersey, announced an end to the mask mandate for schools and day care facilities effective March 7. Murphy joined other Democratic governors from Delaware and Connecticut, John Carney and Ned Lamont, and the Republican governor of Massachusetts, Charlie Baker, with plans of their own for lifting requirements. Pennsylvania's state mask mandate was lifted last month.

SB739's passage renders irrelevant a series of parent-driven lawsuits which sought to enforce Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) mask guidance in schools. These cases were already encountering difficulties at the state court level. Earlier in the month, the Virginia Supreme Court dismissed on procedural grounds a lawsuit filed by a group of 13 Chesapeake parents challenging an executive order signed by Youngkin which banned mask requirements.

The Youngkin administration's claim to be restoring the rights of parents is absurd on its face. In essence, the right being respected by the state is the "right" to become infected, spread COVID-19 and die. Despite this posturing, a *Washington Post* analysis late last month discovered that over half of the state's school districts, representing nearly 70 percent of all students, were continuing to abide by masking requirements despite the administration's executive order then in effect.

A *Washington Post* -George Mason University poll taken in September, as Youngkin ran for Governor on an anti-mask platform, shows that 96 percent of self-identified Democrats and 66 percent of Independents supported in-school masking. Republican voters were split nearly down the middle.

"The way it all went down, in my mind, I just envision Governor Youngkin as Veruca Salt," stated Amanda Lambert, a Chesapeake County 9th grade teacher to the *Post*. "I don't care how, I want it now!"

Others responded to the governor's social media announcement with disgust: "You are making teacher's jobs even more difficult, putting students, teachers and staff at more risk, and undermining professional educators trying to do an already difficult job for too little pay," reads the most popular response on Youngkin's Twitter feed.

Youngkin, in issuing the previous orders, claimed, without proof, that masking "increases feelings of isolation, exacerbating mental health issues," thereby allegedly posing a greater risk to children than COVID-19.

Although masking and vaccines alone do not completely halt COVID-19 transmission and illness, they are highly effective, especially with regards to the use of high-quality masks, such as the KN95 variety. Instead of providing free high-quality masks and a public education campaign to ensure such masks are used properly, Youngkin is pushing the ruling-class' "let 'er rip" mass infection campaign.

The newly-signed law was not the only broadside fired against Virginia schoolchildren and parents in recent days. In late January, Republican Attorney General Jason Miyares issued a legal opinion advising that the state's public universities do not have the authority to require vaccination for COVID-19. Shortly after the decision, the state's major universities dropped their vaccine mandates.

In addition to ensuring community spread of COVID-19, the cumulative impact of this law will be to drive families with immune compromised members out of the public school system, creating an influx of entries into private for-profit schools and charters. This will, in turn, accelerate the destruction and underfunding of public education. Families unable to access this option will be forced to take their chances in unsafe schools, many will get sick and die.

The mass infection policy advocated by the ruling class and big business, designed to keep workers in workplaces pumping out profits, and to keep their children in schools, runs counter to a sane, common-sense public health policy in which the welfare of the general public is paramount.

The working class must fight for a policy that puts public health first and fight to end the pandemic by eliminating COVID-19—through socialist policies independent of both capitalist parties and their lackeys in the trade union bureaucracy.



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