

# Two school districts, and two radically different approaches to managing the pandemic

A comparison between two districts — one in suburban Virginia, the other in rural Pennsylvania — shows how divided school leaders are

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CLARION, Pa. — When the school board that oversees this town’s tiny district of about 730 students voted on a safety plan over the summer, there was no discussion of masks. School administrators had drawn up a plan that did not require them, and one board member who believed they should be mandated did not even raise the question. He was certain it was a nonstarter.

“I’ve got to pick and choose my battles sometimes,” said Braxton White, one of two Democrats on the nine-member board.

In Alexandria, Va., the decision to mandate masks was just as uncontroversial. Superintendent Gregory Hutchings Jr. said he encountered no resistance when the word went out that children and staff would have to wear them in school buildings.

“I really do believe that this is just becoming the way things are,” he said. “This is like our new normal — you know, it’s more awkward with somebody who doesn’t wear a mask.”

For many people in Clarion, the mask symbolizes a capitulation to what they believe to be hysteria over a pandemic whose dangers they say are hyped up by the government and the media. In Alexandria, the masks represent an effective and evidence-based safety measure. Far from fighting mask mandates, some parents are nervous that they won’t be enforced stringently enough. They want more social distancing, especially during lunch, and they have called for a quick implementation of routine coronavirus testing.

So how did these two communities, facing the same deadly threat, come to such different conclusions about what should be done about the pandemic? The answer is relatively simple. Parents and school leaders in both places firmly believe in their respective approaches. Neither thinks the path they are pursuing is particularly controversial. As the schools in both districts opened over the past two weeks, there were no protests, no fighting and, so far, no significant problems.

In Alexandria, the school district is following the advice of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and scientists, all of whom endorse masks and vaccines. In Clarion, there is suspicion of those same authorities, fueled by misinformation and by some politicians and personalities who have dismissed or downplayed the coronavirus’s impact. There is also frustration with restrictions that gutted local businesses and a sense that the pandemic is more of a problem for urban and suburban settings than for their rural community.

In Clarion, with a masks-optional policy in place at the beginning of the school year, Superintendent Joe Carrico said few students or teachers came to school wearing them.

“We’re not seeing cases. We’re not seeing any upticks,” Carrico said in late August. “We’re not seeing any of those things that will warrant a more aggressive approach.”

Last school year, when Pennsylvania mandated masks, Carrico instituted an elaborate set of safeguards to prevent people from getting infected at school, and he kept the doors open every day. The district has just two schools, neither of which is overcrowded, so it was not hard to keep students socially distanced in classrooms. The mandate was diligently enforced; even the student performers in the musical, “Newsies,” wore masks onstage. So did musicians in the band, with those on wind instruments wearing face coverings with small slits to allow them to play. The tuba player was forced to play facing backward.

But this year, when Carrico put together a school safety plan for the school board to approve, he decided to forgo a mask mandate because it seemed like the pandemic was abating. The CDC, which recommended in late July that everyone over age 2 wear masks in school buildings, did not change his mind. Carrico mistakenly thought the CDC was not a government agency and believed its advice was tailored only to hot spots, like those in Florida and Texas.

“We have to look at everything through a local lens,” he said late last month, adding that he would reconsider his stance if there was a severe outbreak at the school.

Clarion borough is about a five-hour drive northwest of the city of Alexandria, but the political and cultural chasm that separates them can make it feel a galaxy apart.

About 60 percent of the Clarion borough's residents cast ballots for President Donald Trump in November. In Alexandria, election results were even more lopsided: About 80 percent of those who went to the polls voted for Joe Biden. Alexandria, across the river from the nation's capital, is more affluent, better-educated and more diverse, with more than a third of its residents identifying as Black or Latino. In the Clarion Area School District, which serves a rural area 75 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, more than nine of 10 residents are White, with small numbers of Black, Latino and Asian residents.

A survey of parents conducted by [Rand Corp.](#) in July found that two-thirds or more of Black, Hispanic and Asian parents said they needed school mask mandates for them to feel as if their child was safe at school. Less than a third of White parents wanted the same. Parents in urban and suburban regions were also more likely to want mask mandates than those in rural regions, according to the survey. And poll after poll has shown that [Republicans are less concerned about the coronavirus than Democrats.](#)

All of these differences can be seen on the ground in both communities and help explain why Alexandria has taken a much more cautious approach than Clarion County, which has a higher coronavirus death rate and case rate than Alexandria. Both have case rates greater than 8,000 per 100,000 people, meaning there have been more than eight infections for every hundred people since the start of the pandemic.

For Alexandria school leaders, those statistics were part of the reason a mask mandate was all but a foregone conclusion. Pointing in part to the demographics of his city, and noting that communities of color have been hit especially hard by the pandemic, Hutchings, who is Black, said he has received very little resistance to his mask mandate.

At Alexandria's Samuel W. Tucker Elementary, Principal Rene Paschal started planning to reopen with required masking even before the school board unanimously voted to mandate it in early August and before Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam (D) ordered a K-12 indoor mask mandate on Aug. 12. When Paschal convened his school reopening team on July 20, everyone around the table that day assumed masks would be part of the equation.

"I did make an assumption that masking was inevitable," Paschal said. "In fact, with the delta variant spiking, it seemed, to me, obvious."

Leslie Weinstein, mother to an Alexandria kindergartner, was shocked when she learned from a reporter that the school board had bothered to vote on the issue. Weinstein's 5-year-old daughter, Charlotte, loves wearing a mask. She has dozens — which Weinstein ordered in a pandemic frenzy of online shopping — but her favorite is printed with butterflies.

"I cannot believe there is such a debate over this," she said. "It is mind-blowing to me that people would question it."

In some parts of the country, debates over whether to require face coverings in schools have stirred turbulent school board meetings, lawsuits, fistfights and knockdown, drag-out conflicts between Republican governors banning mask mandates and local leaders who want them. With these events making headlines, it can be easy to forget that in most places, school leaders decided to require masks — or make them optional — without much fuss. Communities, like Alexandria and Clarion, were generally supportive of the decisions made by their school leaders.

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that masks slow the spread of the coronavirus, which is why the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics have recommended that people over the age of 2 — save those with medical exemptions — wear them inside school buildings.

The calls for masking have grown more urgent as a highly contagious variant of the coronavirus circulates. Late last month, the CDC released a paper detailing an outbreak earlier this year at a Marin County, Calif., elementary school, where an unvaccinated teacher who took off her mask to read aloud in the class infected half her students. And as schools have reopened for the 2021-22 school year, tens of thousands of students in states across the country have tested positive for the virus or have had to be quarantined, portending another school term marked by significant disruptions.

Clarion County's coronavirus statistics are worse per capita than Alexandria's by nearly every measure. The county has a higher rate of overall cases, and its per capita death rate is nearly three times that of Alexandria's. In the past week, Clarion County averaged about nine new cases a day, which comes out to about 23 cases per 100,000 people. Alexandria was averaging about 15 new cases per 100,000 people a day over the past week.

But the pandemic is still perceived by many in Clarion to be a mostly urban problem. Carrico said community members were resistant to restrictions because many had not been directly affected by the virus. Even those who have direct experience with it — having contracted it themselves, or seen friends and family fall seriously ill from it — remained steadfast in their beliefs that the threat was being overblown by public health authorities.

So when school started late last month, many people were not wearing masks: not the superintendent, who was confident being vaccinated would protect him; not the social studies teacher, who previously contracted the disease; not the sixth-grade teacher, who decided to forgo a coronavirus vaccine because she said her doctor told her it would cause fertility issues, which the CDC and other medical experts say is not the case; and not many of the students.

Todd MacBeth, a former teacher and principal who serves on the school board, said he gets information about the virus from individual doctors who have contradicted the CDC, people like Scott Atlas, the controversial Trump adviser who pushed the discredited idea that the virus should be allowed to run rampant to achieve "herd immunity."

“People in general — and students specifically — are not meant to breathe their own exhaust,” said MacBeth, repeating the debunked myth that wearing masks is harmful because it causes the wearer to inhale carbon dioxide and leads to oxygen deprivation. (Doctors and scientists say that’s not true and that there’s no evidence masks harm those who use them.) He added that he was concerned for the mental health of students after hearing from young people who said they “dreaded” attending classes in masks. “You know, kids need to breathe in free, fresh air,” he said. “And the idea of masks is just abhorrent to me.”

Even though they may be growing up in communities on opposite sides of the mask divide, many young people in Clarion and Alexandria shared similar sentiments about them. In some ways, wearing masks felt like unwanted homework: an obligation that students found annoying but necessary. Last year in Clarion, when Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf (D) mandated masks, even reluctant parents complied so their children could return to classrooms.

Over the summer, Wolf said he would allow school districts to come up with their own mask rules. But on Aug. 31, with coronavirus case numbers on the rise in the Keystone State, he changed course and said he would mandate them for all schools and day cares. That left Clarion no choice but to ditch its mask-optional plan and institute a mandate when students return after Labor Day.

Eliza Datko, 12, a seventh-grader at Clarion Area Junior/Senior High, was dubious that masks could prevent the spread of the coronavirus and did not believe she would get all that sick if she caught the virus. Eliza is old enough for a coronavirus vaccination, but her mother, Christie Datko, said she is opposed to it, believing that her son’s autism may be tied to a childhood vaccination. Multiple studies, including by the National Academy of Medicine and the CDC, have shown that vaccinations do not cause autism.

Eliza, a cross-country runner who won a school citizenship award last year, said she was not happy after learning of Wolf’s new mask mandate. “But I’ll do what people want me to do,” she said. “I don’t want to get in trouble.”

Ashton Rex, a 16-year-old junior at Clarion Area Junior/Senior High and a member of the football team, said he was angry that the governor reinstated the mask mandate because he doesn’t believe masks work. He also said he didn’t fear contracting the virus — even though coronavirus outbreaks had forced two opponents to cancel games in recent weeks. But he said he will mask up if he’s threatened with suspension from the football team.

“I don’t think it’s needed at all. I think it’s pretty dumb,” Rex said. “I don’t think covid’s that serious, anyways. I don’t see it as anything more than a cold.”

Alyssa Morrison, a mother of a kindergartner, begrudgingly put a mask on her son during the last school year so he could attend prekindergarten. But this year’s mask mandate was a step too far for her, despite the CDC recommendation.

“I don’t trust the government, and I don’t trust the CDC,” said the 31-year-old hairdresser, who describes herself as a “naturalist” and opposes childhood vaccines. Hours after Wolf made his announcement, Morrison was communicating with other parents about how to resist the mandate, even if it meant home schooling their children.

“I’ll fight it,” she said.

She wasn’t the only one. On Friday, two Republican state lawmakers, two private Christian schools and a trio of parents filed a lawsuit in Commonwealth Court seeking to overturn the mask mandate, according to the Associated Press.

In Alexandria, by contrast, almost all students have complied willingly with the mask mandate, although a small number of parents sought — and were granted — medical exemptions for their children. That includes Liz Fuller, who said that masks make her 7-year-old son, John, who suffers from anxiety and panic attacks, even more anxious and dizzy at school.

Rebecca Grutza, a 7-year-old in Alexandria, and her two sisters said they find the masks uncomfortable and struggle to keep them on all day. That said, Rebecca said she wants to keep everyone safe.

“And if we don’t wear a mask,” she added, “then we can’t be in school.”

In Clarion, with the governor's mask mandate about to take effect, some resistance was brewing. But there was also growing acceptance of the decision. Longtime social studies teacher Dave Constantino said he saw an opportunity for a civics lesson about rights and responsibilities and the need to adhere to the rule.

"We're going to do things that are for the good of the order and the betterment of the town and community," Constantino said he would tell his students.

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