

Local resident starts online petition against public school board's mandatory mask order

Written By ALYSSA PARKHILL

Local Caledon resident Devon Caltagirone has launched an online petition calling on area school boards to remove their mandatory mask order for young students returning to the classroom.

Students from grades one to 12 have been instructed to wear a face covering while attending in-person classes at all Peel District School Board facilities. Kindergarten students are also being 'strongly encouraged' to wear masks.

Caltagirone states that there are a large portion of parents who are on the opposing side, stating students should be able to have the option of whether or not they want to wear a face covering while attending school.

'Everybody was so eager to get their kids back to school, and I know a lot of parents were worried about the masking,' said Caltagirone. 'Teachers, which have also been on the opposing side, brought up how SickKids didn't recommend it. It stated that it would actually be counterproductive and it would also have an emotional and mental toll on the children.'

On July 29, SickKids Hospital released a 'Guidance for School Reopening' information guide for parents, students and teachers on safety measures and medical information regarding students and the COVID-19 virus.

The document goes in to clear depth about the factors that impact students and teachers while schools reopen, including masking for children.

According to the document, 'school-aged children and youth who are not about to remove their NMM (non-medical mask) without assistance should not wear a NMM due to safety concerns. NMMs should also not be worn by children or youth who cannot tolerate an NMM due to cognitive, sensory or mental health issues.'

Caltagirone believes the order is being put into place for the benefit of teachers, rather than students, which she feels is wrong.

'A lot of people who see (the petition), especially for the people in the Caledon area, the epidemiology is so low, there was even a week in August where there were no cases. I think it was mostly what (inspired me to set the petition up), to go on the opposing side and (advocate for) the kids. I think there's a fear that teachers have coming in contact with the children. I think maybe the pressure was on (the school board), and maybe that's why they didn't want to do much more besides do the mandate,' she said.

She added, 'The average classroom is 20 students to one teacher. We're putting the teacher before the children. And I think that's wrong.'

She goes on to explain that students, teachers and staff members within the school become a social bubble within each other, stating how teachers are dealing with the same students daily, as well as the students with their teacher.

Mental health is strongly talked about when in the subject of COVID-19 pandemic, and SickKids Hospital reports that children and youth 'may experience increased stress and anxiety related to the COVID-19 pandemic or to the implantation of risk mitigation strategies in their school environment.'

Caltagirone says that once people can understand the information given by health officials from SickKids Hospital, they'll understand the importance behind allowing masks to be optional.

'I feel like it's ignorance and lack of awareness,' she said. 'We have less than one to one ratio here in Caledon specifically, and it's

really interesting to see this override and not think about the more important things. There're people who live everyday with mental and emotional illness, but their physically bodies are 100 per cent.?

She added, ?Even the fear that people are feeling, I feel if they knew more, they might relax a little bit. It's a sad reality.?

For more information about the SickKids report, please visit sickkids.ca.