

# Watch Now: Amherst residents unleash feelings on masks in schools

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Jan 28, 2022



Amherst County High School senior Cyanna Cabell in January gave an emotional speech to the school board for her reasons to support wearing masks in schools. Lee Luther Jr., for the New Era-Progress

Nearly two years' worth of emotions and views on face masks, their effectiveness or lack thereof, was at the forefront of a public comments session of the Amherst County School Board's special called Jan. 27 meeting on the subject.

The board took more than a dozen comments, most spoken and some written, before discussing the executive order from Gov. Glenn Youngkin on making masks optional for families inside school buildings.

Cari Mays, an Amherst resident, said her children have problems with masks, including migraines, fainting spells, breathing issues and anxiety.

"I feel as though it's given a false sense of security to both the wearers and non-wearers," Mays said. "I just feel it is causing more daily harm than my children personally than it has helped them."

Betsy Allanson-Thomas, an Amherst resident who works for the school division, said her two sons have been told to wear face masks during physical education class, which she finds unacceptable and against common sense. She said many children she interacts with have speech concerns and delays and masks present a communication hardship.

"When I cannot hear them clearly I cannot correct what they are doing. This leads to frustration for lots of our kids," said Thomas, adding some stop trying. "It kills me as an educator to see these children who may already be developmentally delayed to be pushed further behind or delayed even more."

Aaron Tomlin, an Amherst resident who also works for the schools, said the mask issue sadly has become a pawn a political struggle. He said Youngkin's order simply gives parents right to choose and he has no issue with people wearing masks in schools.

"But I believe people should have the right to choose for themselves and their children," Tomlin said.

Madison Heights resident Jeff Porter said he doesn't feel enough good scientific information is available on the subject.

"I don't know how you as a board can go one way or the other in regards to masks because there just isn't enough information," Porter said.

Michelle Hughes, of Madison Heights, said her granddaughter has missed nine weeks of school because of exposure to the virus.

"If masks protect you, then why are the kids being sent home if they're not showing symptoms?" said Hughes, urging the board to think about what the students go through on a daily basis wearing masks.

Madison Heights resident James Weeks, said he homeschools his children because he doesn't want them to deal with the mask requirement. "This issue, and other issues like it, are what's keeping me from putting my kids in public school," he said.

Nicole Younger, of Madison Heights, said COVID-19 cases in Amherst County remain high and the division is uncharted territories on a regular basis with shutdowns and disruptions.

"We are in uncertain times," Younger told the board. "So please consider keeping the masks."

Amherst County High School Principal Derrick Brown said each time the division has changed mitigation strategies to protect against COVID, a disruption has followed. The school has many valuable events and activities coming up and students have prepped against all odds and hundreds have had their lives disrupted. He asked to keep the mask rule in place to protect students and staff.

"We have asked our teachers to do a lot during this pandemic, more than ever before," Brown said. "I don't just feel like it's fair to ask them navigate another change."

Gloria Witt, president of the Amherst branch of the NAACP, said no one wants to damage a child by requiring masks. She noted the division in the community over the topic.

"My hope is that this board makes a decision to be a leader and not a follower and do the right thing for our kids," said Witt in supporting the mask rule in interest of safety.

Suzanne Chambers, a county resident, urged the board to err on the side of caution in upholding the mask rule.

"None of us has the right to endanger another person," Chambers said. "You don't have the right to hurt someone else."

The Amherst Education Association in written remarks also supported keeping masks in place to keep students and staff healthy in maintaining in-person learning.

“We believe the continuation of this practice is crucial,” a statement from the association read during the meeting said.

Cyanna Cabell, a student at the high school, spoke in favor of the mask rule in protecting students.

Ethan Ramsey, a senior at the school, also wrote the board and urged it to not follow Youngkin’s executive order. He wrote he knows everyone is tired of the pandemic but if a mask saves even one life in the community, the measure is worthwhile.

“This is not an issue about freedom of choice but keeping students safe,” Ramsey wrote. “There are some decisions children are not mature enough to make and by letting them transmit a deadly virus to others you are failing them and the whole community.”