



September 1, 2021

The Honorable Kevin Stitt
Office of the Governor
Capitol Building
2300 Lincoln Blvd., Room 212
Oklahoma City, OK 73105

Dear Governor Stitt,

On behalf of the 320 people in Oklahoma living with cystic fibrosis (CF), we write to urge Oklahoma to amend SB 658 to exempt all K-12 schools from policies prohibiting mask requirements to ensure the necessary flexibility to protect students and staff during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, we urge you to direct school districts to offer remote learning during the 2021-2022 academic year if masks are not mandated as an accommodation for students at higher risk for severe illness from the virus, including those with CF.

About cystic fibrosis and COVID-19

Cystic fibrosis is a life-threatening genetic disease that affects more than 30,000 people in the United States, including 170 children in Oklahoma. CF is a complex, multi-system disease that causes the body to produce thick, sticky mucus that clogs the lungs and digestive system, which can lead to life-threatening infections. Cystic fibrosis is both serious and progressive; while great strides have been made in the treatment of the disease, lung damage caused by infection is irreversible and can have a lasting impact on length and quality of life.

As COVID-19 continues to present a serious and ongoing risk to Oklahoma residents, both children and adults living with CF remain at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19, as compared to those without underlying conditions.¹ Community transmission of the virus remains high in Oklahoma and, as of September 1, over 490 cases per 100,000 in Oklahoma have been reported in the past week, the 9th highest case rate of any state in the country.² In light of the recent emergence of the Delta and other new variants, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended that Americans continue to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 and protect those who are most vulnerable to infection.³

Amend SB 658 to extend flexibility for all K-12 schools

The Cystic Fibrosis Foundation believes that in-person learning is vital for children's social development and emotional well-being. However, especially in the absence of approved vaccinations for children under age 12, precautions like masking remain a vital tool in preventing infection and spread of the virus; both the CDC and American Academy of Pediatrics recommend universal masking in schools at this time, with the goal of keeping students safe and physically present in school.^{4,5} We support these recommendations and urge school districts to require all teachers, staff, students, and visitors at K-12 schools to wear masks at school, regardless of vaccination status, to ensure a safe return to in-person learning.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/children/symptoms.html#higher-risk>

² https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_casesper100klast7days

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html>

⁵ <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

Extend remote learning accommodations for the 2021-2022 academic year

In addition to allowing school districts the flexibility to implement safety measures for their staff and students, we urge you to direct school districts in Oklahoma to extend remote learning as an accommodation for high-risk students and their families, including children with CF and their siblings, if they do not implement a mask requirement. This request echoes the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) that “special considerations and accommodations to account for the diversity of youth should be made, especially for populations facing inequities, including those who are medically fragile or complex.”⁶ The Cystic Fibrosis Foundation believes that the decision to return to in-person learning should be made on a case-by-case basis and is best left to a child’s family and their care team.

Importance of COVID-19 vaccines for the CF community

The CF Foundation encourages vaccination for all people with CF and their families who are eligible to receive one. All three authorized vaccines have been shown to be safe and effective, especially at preventing hospitalizations and death. Side effects have been rare and minor for most people. As stated above, COVID-19 represents a serious threat for individuals with chronic underlying conditions, including cystic fibrosis. The thick, sticky mucus characteristic of the disease makes people with CF particularly prone to intractable, life-long bacterial infections. Furthermore, respiratory viral infections can trigger pulmonary exacerbations, acute episodes of worsening symptoms associated with irreversible lung damage, morbidity, and mortality. Recognizing our population’s vulnerability to severe illness and complications from COVID-19, and the proven safety and efficacy of vaccines, the CF Foundation has and will continue to encourage vaccination for all people with CF and their families.

The Cystic Fibrosis Foundation urges you to swiftly amend SB 658 to permit all K-12 schools to implement mask requirements and to advise local school districts to adopt remote learning as an option for people with CF and their families during the 2021-2022 academic year if masking is not required. We stand ready to serve as a resource to the legislature and to the state as they plan for the reopening of K-12 schools this fall. Please contact Adam Kellermann at akellermann@cff.org or (240) 200-3713 if you would like to discuss this issue further.

Sincerely,



Mary B. Dwight
Chief Policy & Advocacy Officer
Senior Vice President, Policy & Advocacy

⁶ <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

cc: Senator Greg Treat, Senate President Pro Tempore
Representative Charles McCall, Speaker of the House
Representative Terry O'Donnell, House Speaker Pro Tempore
Senator Kim David, Senate Majority Floor Leader
Senator Kay Floyd, Senate Democratic Leader
Representative Jon Echols, House Majority Floor Leader
Representative Emily Virgin, House Democratic Leader