**July 29, 2021**

**School Safety Protocol & Students with Disabilities**

Dear School Boards and Superintendents,

Tennessee kids with disabilities deserve to go to school like their peers. They want to learn, make friends and take part in the school community. As I’m sure you know firsthand, their participation enriches that community. Participation is also a right afforded to them by federal law through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

As kids and their families prepare for the upcoming school year, many are scared and uncertain. The COVID-19 pandemic isn’t going away and pre-existing health conditions make kids with special health care needs, chronic illness and disabilities at higher risk.

These students and their families look to you to support the safety of the entire school community. At this time, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and American Academy of Pediatrics advise that everyone in the school community wear masks. The use of universal masking is especially important for students with disabilities, like Madilyn who is seven and has heart, kidney and lung disease and Shreve who has chronic lung disease and desperately wants to go in-person to second grade this year

It is not enough for them alone to wear a mask to school - everyone must mask up in order to keep them safe and healthy.

As you prepare school safety protocol for the upcoming school year, we implore you to protect your most vulnerable students and support the health and participation of the entire school community by requiring masks for all. If someone with a disability is not able to wear a face mask, you will also need to consider reasonable modifications to a face mask policy so that the person with the disability can participate in, or benefit from, the programs offered or services provided.

We understand the weight of this responsibility. Some school districts and boards of education have found resources including guidance from local health departments useful in supporting effective safety protocol. While some legislators may have reached out to say that you cannot mandate masks, this is simply untrue. Governor Lee has granted this right to local districts. Local school boards have the legal authority to create and vote on a mask policy.

Please don’t hesitate to reach out if we may be of any assistance. The Disability Coalition on Education is a gathering of organizations and individuals from across the state that work to improve access to education and school success for students with disabilities.

Sincerely,

Heidi Haines

Executive Director, The Arc Tennessee

On behalf of the Disability Coalition on Education



 

