To Mask or Not to Mask in School
OSF HealthCare Newsroom
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The latest surge in COVID-19 cases is easing across Illinois and other parts of the Midwest, but the arguments around wearing masks to curb the spread of the virus rage on.

Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker announced February 9 the state's indoor mask mandate in most public places will be lifted at the end of the month, but will remain in place for schools for the time being.

Some school districts across the state have taken the matter into their own hands, filing a lawsuit saying local boards of education should have the say on whether to require kids and staff to mask while at school. A judge in central Illinois issued a temporary restraining order in favor of those districts Feb. 4, striking a major blow against masking and COVID-19 vaccination requirements in schools. The Pritzker administration has since filed for an appeal.

Among the arguments made by those who filed the lawsuit are claims that requiring masks does nothing to curb the spread of COVID-19 in schools.

SOT Lori Grooms, Director of Infection Prevention – OSF HealthCare
(There have been several studies that actually do support the use of a bundled approach. Your bundled approach is looking at several different things that would include masking, physical distancing, disinfection and cleaning, as well as ventilation. :18)

Lori Grooms is the director of Infection Prevention for OSF HealthCare. She says children tend to have milder illness and fewer symptoms when it comes to COVID-19, so they can actually be an asymptomatic carrier and if you don't know it, they could expose others at home or in their classroom.

Grooms says there are studies done during the pandemic that back up the benefit of children and staff wearing masks while in school.

SOT Lori Grooms, Director of Infection Prevention – OSF HealthCare
(North Carolina did a wonderful study with 11 school districts. And they found that during their times of masking in their bundled approach, there were decreases in outbreaks. Israel was the same way before they had vaccination. They were masking and then as they came out and were unmasking, they started to see outbreaks. So we do have some data that is out there. :28)

Grooms knows masking in school is a hot button topic. She says we need to find common ground, be aware of our own belief bias, and give each other – especially those with opposing views – a little grace.

SOT Lori Grooms, Director of Infection Prevention – OSF HealthCare
(You may decide that you know it's best for your child to wear a mask and you know masking is not just for my protection. It is a source control measure, so it serves two purposes. It serves to protect everyone around me but it serves to protect myself and you have to be aware of that and you really have to have that understanding as well. :20)

Regardless of the choice to mask or unmask, Grooms encourages parents to make sure kids know the basics of infection prevention when they go to school. They need to know to cover their cough by coughing into their elbow or Kleenex, to make sure they're throwing tissues away after they've used them, and to practice good hand hygiene - cleaning their hands often and well.