This toolkit has been developed in alignment with the Parabola Project School Reopening Readiness Guide. It is intended to help teachers and educator leaders understand and develop approaches for a specific problem of educational practice as schools seek to reopen during the COVID-19 pandemic; while we hope it is useful in decision-making, it does not supplant state or district-level policies. The content
reflects the available information at the time the guide was last revised but is expected to continue to evolve.
Building a "Mask Culture:"

How do I develop mask-wearing as a cultural norm in my classroom?

Key Takeaways

- Mask-wearing is an important evidence-based practice for reducing the risks of COVID-19 infection associated with the return to socially distanced, in-person learning. Teachers and leaders should build classroom and school-level cultural norms that support, reinforce, and celebrate mask-wearing as a critical habit for health as well as a commitment of caring for all school community members.

- Educators should consider a variety of ongoing strategies, procedures, and protocols. Ideas include: engaging parents and stakeholders as partners in messaging and practice, developing explicit lessons that help students understand why mask-wearing is important, integrating ways to normalize and make mask-wearing more fun, supporting student learning about how to recognize and communicate emotional and nonverbal information while wearing a mask, and consistently implementing mask breaks as well as responses to non-compliance.

What is the problem?

With the return to in-person learning, frontline educators will be responsible for enforcing mask-wearing guidelines to help minimize the spread of COVID-19. Teachers will need strategies to encourage students to keep their masks on and create a positive culture where mask-wearing is the accepted norm. This toolkit is intended to provide concrete resources and strategies for teachers and other professionals working with students to help accomplish this goal.

Why is it important?

Near universal wearing of non-medical (i.e., cloth) masks can reduce community transmission of COVID-19 when combined with other mitigation strategies.¹ Wearing masks can help

minimize the chance that students contract the virus themselves or spread it to fellow students, staff members, and family members.

For this reason, it is recommended that students and staff of all ages wear masks throughout the school day, including on the bus and outside if a distance of six feet or more cannot be maintained. For more detailed recommendations as well as technical information on mask selection, wearing, and potential exceptions to this rule, check out Principle 7 in the Parabola Project’s School Re-Opening Readiness Guide.

How: Strategies for Action
Mask-wearing is one of the most important ways that every member of a school community shares responsibility for everyone’s health, safety, learning, and wellbeing. Positive and clear messaging from teachers and parents/caregivers alongside strategies, protocols, and creative ideas for incorporating masks into daily life can support students’ adjustment to this new facet of school culture. The following strategies offer some concrete steps that educators can take to cultivate this culture.

1. **Partner with caregivers/parents**
2. **Develop lesson plans to share the “why” behind masks**
3. **Implement ways to make mask-wearing fun**
4. **Normalize mask-wearing with images**
5. **Consider ways for students to convey and recognize emotions while wearing masks**
6. **Develop protocols for students who take off their masks**
7. **Build opportunities for students to take mask breaks**

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1. **Partner with caregivers/parents**

Parents and caregivers are critical partners for ensuring that students develop consistent mask-wearing habits in public (at school and beyond). It is important to proactively reach out to caregivers and other community partners before the beginning of the school year to establish ongoing communication and develop shared understanding of expectations, best practices, and needs.

**Resources and Ideas**

Encourage families that have not been wearing masks regularly to **start practicing wearing them** this summer so students can get used to them. Families that have been wearing masks all along may be interested in information about effective mask-wearing and
washing. Consider partnering with your local public health department to spread the word about and reinforce understanding of mask-wearing at school and beyond the walls of your building.

**Send home clear guidelines** through the regular channels (e.g., mailed newsletters, emailed newsletters, texts, robocalls) used throughout the school year. Communications should aim for a positive tone, be clear in their goal (e.g., “this message is intended to help us work together to support your child’s learning and safety”), offer practical suggestions in addition to requirements, and be accessible in a family’s home language. Messages should also create open channels for caregivers/parents to ask questions or reach out for support. This is particularly important for families that feel less connected to the school community or have had past negative experiences with school personnel.

Content should include clear guidance on:

- Why masks are critically important to every student’s and family’s safety and health
- Who is required to wear masks
- Where and when are they required to wear masks
- Where to purchase appropriate masks locally or online
- What conditions exempt individuals from wearing masks and what steps are required to authorize these exemptions
- Specifications for the masks (e.g., K95 or N95 masks, surgical masks, or cloth masks made from fabric recommended by the CDC that cover the mouth and nose)
- Options for students with financial difficulties to procure masks or keep masks clean

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2 See the [Readiness Guide](#) for more information.
● Steps that will be taken at school if a student refuses to wear a mask or removes their mask without permission

● School staff able to answer questions families may have about mask-wearing expectations

Provide ideas for activities that caregivers/parents can do at home before the school year begins to prepare their children to wear masks at school.

● Find suggestions for caregivers/parents of elementary school-aged students from behavior analyst Dana Howell (shown right). Printable versions are available in English and Spanish.

● Share this video that explores how to desensitize children to mask-wearing.

Engage families by hosting information sessions to set expectations and address any questions or concerns families may have.

2. Develop lesson plans to share the “why” behind masks

Students of all ages should build understanding about the importance of wearing a mask in their community. Rather than being thought of as “scary” or a demand to comply with, educators can help kids reframe mask-wearing as a simple yet powerful act to keep themselves, their friends, and their families healthy and safe. Incorporate these lessons into the first few weeks of school to establish a strong foundation for mask-wearing at school and build a new healthy habit.

Resources and Ideas

Lessons for students of different grade and developmental levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Lesson and Activity Ideas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Learners (K-2)</td>
<td>● Watch videos about mask-wearing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>○ CNN Video: Dr. Gupta shows Elmo how to put on a mask</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Wearing a Mask: A video for children</td>
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- Incorporate books about mask-wearing into literacy time
  - **“Seeing Other People Wearing Masks:”** A simple story explaining why people are wearing masks (narration available as well)
  - **Wearing a Mask to School: A story for children**
  - **The Mask Task: Story for Young Learners**
  - **“Behind My Mask / Detrás de mi Cubrebocas:”** A bilingual book that includes reflective activities about emotions and promotes the use of masks
  - **“We’re Going to Be OK”**

- Have students draw a self-portrait wearing a mask or develop their own story about being a mask “superhero”

- Conduct mask “experiments” to explore how masks work
  - **Elementary Grades (3-5)**
    - If lit candles are allowed and can be used safely in your classroom, try to blow out a candle using a mask. Ask the students what they saw or thought. Have them develop a hypothesis and test it for them.
    - Fill two bowls with a substance like pepper flakes or glitter to represent germs, cough into the first not wearing a mask and watch the material spread. Put on a mask and then do it again, then ask the students what they saw or thought. Have them develop a hypothesis and test it for them.
  - **Middle School (6-8)**
    - Explore the “facts vs. fiction” of mask-wearing by having students brainstorm what they know or have heard about mask-wearing, and then look for and evaluate evidence that supports or counters it
    - Use this [PBS NewsHour lesson plan](https://www.pbs.org/wnet/newsHour/) to have students explore how to invent personal protective equipment for infants
    - Empower students to create campaigns and messaging that can be used at schools and in the community
    - Share [this PSA video with Bill Nye the Science Guy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQ4sQ7KoIcA), and then challenge your students to create their own
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School (9-12)</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Have students draw a self-portrait or create another piece of art that expresses how they feel about wearing a mask, then talk about those feelings (while reinforcing the importance of mask-wearing)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Explore the “facts vs. fiction” of mask-wearing by having students brainstorm what they know or have heard about mask-wearing and then look for and evaluate evidence that supports or counters it</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Have students research different kinds of masks to understand the “why” behind various recommendations</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Use this <a href="https://pbs.org/parents/lesson-plan-everyday-use/">PBS NewsHour lesson plan</a> to explore public perceptions and communications about mask-wearing</td>
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| - Empower students to create campaigns and messaging that can be used at schools and in the community. Here are some examples of student campaigns:  
  - [Mask Mission AK](https://www.maskmissionak.com) developed by West High School students in Anchorage, AK.  
  - Share this [PSA video with Bill Nye the Science Guy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jw7aZ5HsCQk), and then challenge your students to create their own. |
| - Engage students empathically about their feelings regarding mask wearing. Give teenagers resources for how to talk about masks and encourage mask-wearing with others (e.g., this [Teen Vogue article](https://www.teenvogue.com/life/2020/06/how-to-talk-about-mask-wearing/)) |
| - Empower students to discuss the importance of mask wearing with peers and community members, perhaps through role-modeling |

### 3. Implement ways to make mask-wearing fun

Students may be more willing to wear masks if they are viewed as an exciting or creative part of their academic life. Whether it be a medium for expressing their personality, a way to demonstrate school pride, or simply a matching accessory for their outfit, incorporating different ways to make masks congenial for students can help encourage them to wear masks at school. Expect some middle and high school students to decorate masks to make provocative statements. Be ready to respond to these in ways that reinforce mask-wearing and support self-expression and social connections during these times of social isolation while respecting the feelings and sensitivities of others.


**Resources and Ideas**

**Explore ways to help students (appropriately) channel individuality and creativity through masks.** Mask-wearing can be a tool for self-expression. Invite students to choose masks that have meaning, such as one associated with a school club or project or conveying a personal message (as appropriate based on existing dress codes). They can use fabric markers on cloth masks to create their own designs and decorate them. *(Note: fabric markers should not be used on K95, N95, or surgical masks.)*

- Districts/schools can run mask design challenges or contests and display student submissions on social media as well as in newsletters, on posters, and through other forms of communication.
  - i.e., [Colorado Face Mask Design Challenge](#)

**Build school spirit.** Schools can distribute, sell, or make masks available with school logos or mascots to boost school pride. *(Note: Schools should always ensure that students who cannot afford masks have access to them without being stigmatized, and should keep extra single-use, disposable masks on hand for students or staff who have forgotten their masks or whose masks become compromised.)*

**Create some “cohort” style.** If students are divided into cohorts/houses/homerooms (in accordance with the school schedule), students can design masks along with their peers or receive themed masks to represent their cohort.

- e.g., Schools can incorporate a [house system](#) and receive a mask at their “sorting.”

**Integrate masks in existing school culture systems.** Bring mask-wearing into existing culture systems, such as class-level challenges. Have students work together as cohorts to earn points towards rewards for remembering to bring their masks to school.

**Encourage local partners to contribute.** School districts must ensure that funds are available to ensure that all students, school personnel, and others physically present in school buildings have access to clean, effective face coverings, without stigmatizing those without sufficient funds to purchase them.

- Parent-teacher organizations (PTO) can raise funds to buy themed masks for students.
- Schools can work with a local print shop to print student designs on masks at a low cost.
- Community members or parents can sew homemade masks for students (follow CDC guidelines for cloth face coverings).
- Businesses can donate masks to local schools in support of teams or extracurricular events.

4. Normalize mask-wearing with images

Seeing people continuously wearing masks can be jarring and unfamiliar for many students. Provide visual images of various figures (e.g., students, staff, community leaders, celebrities, cartoon characters) wearing masks in different settings to help develop a cultural norm. Distribute these images in multiple outlets including social media, posters, presentations, and newsletters.

**Resources and Ideas**

**Empower students to develop their own visual images** that normalize mask-wearing through class assignments, art projects, school mural projects, and/or extracurricular activities.

**Start a ”Wearing is Caring” social media campaign** that shows students and staff wearing masks. Staff members can start posting these pictures over the summer to begin normalizing the images, and staff/students can continue posting throughout the school year with examples of carrying out daily activities while wearing masks. *Note: Comply with COPPA and only post images of students over the age of 13 with parents'/caregivers’ permission.*
Put up posters providing visual reminders of how to properly wear a mask. The CDC and WHO have created printable posters and infographics (CDC, WHO). Consider asking students to create their own.
Poster Credit: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

Have your mascot wear a mask ("MASK-OT") and put masks on images of the mascot on places like letterheads, school banners, etc.

Reinforce messaging by showing students images of familiar people and objects. See examples below:

![Photo Credit: CBS Boston](#)

![Photo Credit: www.boston.com](#)
5. Consider ways to help students convey and recognize emotions with masks

For younger students, school is a place where they learn about expressing their feelings and understanding emotions in others, and they do so throughout each day with staff members and their peers. Wearing a mask makes it more challenging for all students and adults, especially those with certain developmental differences, to recognize emotions, so alternative methods are needed.

**Resources and Ideas**

Consider “clear-window” masks for educators working with students who need to lipread in order to understand what is being said. These can be purchased online but can also be created.

Develop a system of signals and gestures that convey specific emotions while wearing a mask (e.g., thumbs up for feeling happy) and check in with students individually and as a class. Common hand gestures can be used to communicate ideas and needs. Classes can also develop verbal ways to communicate about and collectively adopt norms around mood and emotion, such as using the colors of zones of regulation or conducting routine and as-needed emotional check-ins using words or paralanguage such as pictures or emoji characters.

Incorporate simple games in which students can use body language and share verbal information to practice understanding emotions. For example, students could play a “guess the emotion” game, in the style of charades, where they draw an emotion from a hat and act it out for their peers. Have them experiment with pitch, tone, and hand and eye movements.

6. Develop consistent approaches for students who take off their masks or break protocols

Students will inevitably take off their masks or have them slip so they are not covering their nose and/or mouth fully in times and areas that they are required. Staff members will need language and protocols to use when this occurs. Educators will not be able to move in closer than six feet to provide redirection. Non-punitive measures will be more effective than punitive ones, because ultimately only the students have control over whether they keep their mask on. Punitive responses are likely to weaponize non-mask wearing. Students will quickly learn that they cannot be forced to wear masks and that they have the power to provoke dramatic reactions when they take off their masks. School-based behavioral support teams may be helpful in addressing challenges with specific students who repetitively decline to wear their masks.
masks to allow educators to focus on instructing their classroom rather than monitoring mask-wearing.

Resources and Ideas

Redirect the student in as minimally a disruptive manner as possible and avoid shaming. For example, if a student is using a device, is there a way to message the student on the device? Could you gesture covering your face to remind students? Could you do a classwide announcement reminding people to make sure masks are on properly so as to avoid singling a student out? If basic reminders are not working, consider seeking further support with the help of local behavioral support teams.

If the student is eating or drinking, ascertain that this is being done according to protocol. Assure this is happening at the right place, right time, and in the right way – alone, adequately distanced, or in the presence of others who are all masked. If not, communicate the expectations clearly and offer supportive suggestions for behavioral modification.

The student may need a mask break. Allow for expressions of feelings (e.g., “I hate wearing this thing”), validate these feelings (e.g., “Yeah, it gets uncomfortable”), and offer an alternative (e.g., let them know when a mask break is coming up or give them instructions on taking a break safely). In general, mask breaks should be scheduled at regular intervals that all students are aware and reminded of. Additional, individual mask breaks may be necessary for some students at times but care should be taken to design these so that they do not provide inadvertent additional “benefits,” such as a break from classroom work.

If a student is openly defiant and refuses to wear their mask, the student may require a more direct intervention, such as private discussion at a safe distance. Consider having designated areas in the school and professionals available to address these situations, and develop a consistent process for this. These processes should center on refocusing behaviors and keeping learning on track.

7. Build opportunities for students to take mask breaks

Wearing a mask for hours can put a strain on students. Schedule specific times during the day for students to briefly and safely remove their masks for a more comfortable experience while at school. For elementary students, teachers may benefit from guidance to support their entire classroom with mask breaks for students while ensuring social distancing. In middle and high-school settings, a schoolwide schedule for mask breaks is more likely necessary (considering staggering, social distancing, use of outside space).

Start by reviewing your schedule. When are students already getting breaks from masks throughout the day (e.g., socially distanced lunch without masks, recess outside)? Are there
long stretches of time during which students do not have breaks? Plan out scheduled mask breaks as a predictable and integrated part of the school day. *(Note: The American Dermatological Association has suggested mask breaks for 15 minutes at least every four hours can be helpful.)*

**Designate an area of the school for individual, one-person-at-a-time mask breaks and allow students to take a break during independent work time.** If possible, have mask breaks outdoors while still requiring at least six feet of physical distance. Your school’s administrators should help you identify an appropriate location as well as set a schedule for this.

**Share your resources or ideas!**

Do you have a resource that you have developed to support the creation of a mask-wearing culture that you want to see featured in this toolkit, or do you have feedback on this toolkit? Submit it to parabolaproject@learningaccelerator.org.