



Offer reasonable accommodations for students who are unable to wear face coverings

In light of COVID-19, many states advise the use of face masks on most individuals, with a few exceptions.

For example, the New Jersey Department of Education has advised that everyone in districts across the state must wear a face mask unless doing so inhibits an individual's health, the individual is under 2 years of age, or if the face covering could be impractical for an individual with a disability, said Lauren E. Tedesco-Dallas, a school attorney at Capehart Scatchard in Mt. Laurel, N.J.

Students with autism, asthma, anxiety, or other physical or mental impairments may not be able to wear face masks, she said. "The face coverings cannot be implemented for everyone," she said. "That's a reality. There needs to be an understanding of that."

When you have a student who is not able to wear a face covering, look at other measures. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Rearrange classroom seating arrangements.** Turn all the desks in the classroom to face the same direction, as opposed to having them face each other, Tedesco-Dallas said. Or seat all students on one side of a table, spaced apart, instead of using a circular table. Or, you can place physical barriers between student desks.
- **Implement mask breaks.** Let the students take off their masks for outside activities such as recess or socially distanced gym, Tedesco-Dallas said.
- **Practice social distancing.** Where a mask isn't possible, consider whether social distancing is, Tedesco-Dallas said. It's difficult to socially distance on a bus, for example, but if you can, then it's highly recommended because you may have a student on the bus who is unable to wear a mask. To do this, some districts are having parents drive their students to school. That allows for more social distancing on buses because they are not filled to capacity as they would normally be, she said.



- **Discuss options with parents.** "In terms of accommodations, a lot of the requests have been focused on face coverings," Tedesco-Dallas said. If a parent requests an accommodation for his child with respect to a face covering, engage the parent and the student in a discussion, she said. Then, document whatever reasonable accommodation will be placed in the student's Section 504 plan. This is especially important if you have teachers or other staff members who are older and therefore in the vulnerable population more at risk for catching COVID-19.

"That could cause some issues," Tedesco-Dallas said. "They [might] say, 'We're in a sensitive population, and that child is not wearing a mask.' There needs to be some documentation as to why that child is not wearing a mask or cannot wear a mask."

- **Keep in mind what's practical.** "I think the bottom line is this all has to be implemented to the extent practical and possible," Tedesco-Dallas said. "Sometimes, what's recommended is not practical and possible, depending on what the setting is. It will take some creativity on the district's part."

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