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Mask-No Mask or Some Other Solution

What is in the Best Interest of the Children?

Sometimes I write to inform and convince and sometimes I write to create a record. As this issue appears to be baked into our society, I do not see that what I write will change many, if any, minds. At the same time, I am hopeful that it will help create a portion of the record for those deciding about masks for our school children to help them make the best decision they can for the health and welfare of the children and others.

As I watched parents, pastors, and politicians appear before the Dorchester County School Board the other night and listened to their presentations on whether masks should be mandated or decided by parents, I did not hear much about what was in the best interest of the children and our community. I heard about Critical Race Theory, as if it was going to be taught in the public schools, which it is not. I heard interpretations of what the Maryland Constitution says, which was written and adopted centuries prior to Covid-19 and is impacted by federal and state laws, court decisions interpreting them, and modern medicine.

I did not hear about U.S. Supreme Court decisions from the early 1900’s that allowed vaccinations to be mandated by government or federal law that allows it under certain circumstances. I did not hear that “Critical Race Theory” is at best being taught in law schools and graduate schools under limited circumstances and is not being taught in our public-school system. Despite my inclination to favor masks as the most conservative and least selfish thing that could be done to protect the children in school, their teachers, and our community while also, hopefully, keeping the schools open, I decided to take a step back and look at the facts to see if I might be mistaken.

What are the relevant facts about which most people would agree?

* Covid-19 exists in different variations; or it does not exist at all and is a hoax. The evidence that it exists is overwhelming.
* The Delta Variant came from India, and it has created new and different challenges for the health of everyone including children.
* There is disagreement as to how potent the Covid-19 virus and the other variants are and whether people need to be vaccinated in order to avoid the more serious consequences. It appears that in southern states where there are fewer vaccinations there is a growing spread of the Delta Variant that is also impacting more children.
* Most deaths from Covid-19 in the United States have been elderly people and not children or young adults.
* Many millions of people around the world have suffered effects from Covid-19 ranging from few, if any, consequences to serious health issues and death.
* Over 600,000 people in the United States both healthy and not healthy have died where Covid-19 has been determined to be at least a contributing factor.
* The number of those who have died is a small part of the total population of the United States, but those that have died have family and friends that mourn their passing.
* Approximately 50% of the people who live in Dorchester County have not been vaccinated including those children under the age of 12 who are not allowed to be vaccinated.
* During the past school year, the school system struggled to provide in-school teaching for its students that did not satisfy many, if any, people in our community, especially parents of those children.
* In-school teaching is far preferable to long distance/internet learning especially for our youngest students
* Children need to be with and play with other children in order to be mentally and physically healthy.
* Covid-19 is spread most effectively through the air and close contact among people.
* Masks, while not a total solution to the problem, provide along with social distancing some protection from the spreading of the virus.
* Children, especially young ones, are active, need direction from adults

(Preferably parents), and do not always do as they are told by parents or other adults such as teachers.

* Parents have the primary responsibility to ensure the health and well-being of their children – that includes parents who want their children and people around them to wear masks as well as parents who do not want their children to wear masks and don’t care if others wear masks.

So, what should the school board and superintendent do with these facts and others they might consider? Which parents should have the greater rights? Should their decision be based simply on the wishes of well-intentioned parents who have more people speak at a school board meeting? Should it be based on what would be in the best interest of the children, to the extent that medical knowledge can be helpful? Should it be based on how the exposure of the children to Covid-19 could affect them, other children of all ages and health conditions in the schools, teachers and staff of all ages and health conditions in the schools and on the buses that deliver the children to school and take them home? Should the willingness of members of the community to volunteer in the schools be considered depending on whether masks are required or not?

Let’s first assume for the sake of argument that Covid-19 does not exist. If that is the case, would so many people be ill from it or dying from it? For those who think that it is a hoax, I have no answer that would satisfy you; so, you probably do not need to read any further.

There is too much evidence, however, from our local hospitals, Dorchester Health Department, and school system as well as the rest of the world that shows that it is not a hoax. So, for those of you that agree that it exists, but that masks don’t work, and that you should make the decision as to whether your child should wear a mask at school, what rights do those parents have that disagree with you? How can they protect their children from one or more of your children who have the virus, if masks don’t work or work but are not worn? How can you protect your children from their children who have the virus and wear the masks, if masks don’t work?

If you think that other parents are wrong if they believe that masks work, you are then asking that all children should attend school unprotected from the virus, except for the vaccine for the older children that you also may think is useless. You are also asking that they attend school where a teacher or staff person may be infected and, in working with your child, may infect him or her. While you may think that no children will have serious consequences, that is already known not to be the case, and is not solely your right to decide. What if you are wrong?

Years ago, I made those kinds of decisions in individual cases of children who were sick; the medical evidence showed they would die without medical attention; but their parents were not willing to allow, for religious reasons, blood transfusions or medical procedures that are known to be effective such as for cancer treatment. I heard the facts along with the wishes and reasons of parents and always, when the medical evidence supported it, made the decision to override the wishes of the parents. Sometimes one parent disagreed with the other. In every case where I was able to observe the parents as I explained my decision, I saw relief on their faces and not anger or bitterness.

I also had to make a decision for an adult in the 1980’s during the early years of AIDS. He wanted to leave the hospital, as the medical treatment was not going to save him. He knew it. The doctors admitted it but asked the court to prevent him from leaving care. It would be years until science could develop medication and treatment that would have saved his life.

While I knew what my decision would be very early in the hearing because the medical testimony was so weak, I also sensed that the patient’s family wanted to be heard. It was a family that had been pulled apart by his decisions on choice of a partner and the person who gave him AIDS, but it was a family that loved him and wanted to do what they could to reconcile with him. So, for another hour, I heard family members tell him and me how much they loved him and how much they wanted him to come home with them. I then decided that the hospital could not hold him against his will and allowed him to go home with his family. In that case individual rights prevailed, as they should have.

As we hear the facts of why masks are needed or not needed, the overriding concerns should be the health of the children, the people that work with them, and how the people that run our school system can do their best to maintain in-school settings that are as safe as possible. Stories from elsewhere in the country detail too many schools being closed already because of the spread of Covid-19 among the students and teachers. Those are in-school systems where the general population in those communities has been vaccinated to a greater extent than here in Dorchester County.

Adults need to look at our own behavior with regard to vaccinations to understand what we see as important to the children in our community. Our failure to be vaccinated, except for valid medical reasons, even if we think that we will not get sick from the virus, does not consider the other people with whom we have contact – adult or child- who might be infected by us. Their response to the virus can be very different from ours.

The failure of half of our community to be vaccinated, especially when no one can tell who has or has not been vaccinated, simply indicates that, with limited exceptions, some adults believe that their individual rights are more important than the rights of others, including their children, other family members, and the community.

The potential for a lawsuits against the school system by parents on either side of this issue exist. Without considering what the claims might be – constitutional, parental rights, etc. – the evidence to support a claim by parents that demand the right to decide for themselves is minimal while the evidence to support a claim by parents who want mandatory masks in order for schools to try to stay open is more than sufficient to convince a court. Certainly, as part of this process, the school system might well come up with some compromise between the two positions.

In making any decision, the school system will anger at least one-half of the adults in Dorchester County, if not more. If the decision is for no mask mandate, and Covid-19 returns to some or all of the schools, in-school teaching will stop for most students. That will make most, if not all, parents angry about the results of the decision not to require masks. The school system would be smart to choose the side or a position that has the greatest chance of winning in court and minimizing the number of angry parents while protecting children.

Despite the claim by some who spoke at the school board meeting, this decision is not a political one. It is not about whether we will or won’t vote for a certain board member in the next election based on what they do in this situation. That may happen, and it certainly is your individual right, but it is about the board and the superintendent making the right decision that will, to the extent possible, protect the children, teachers, school staff, bus drivers, and volunteers who come into our schools. Anything less is a violation of their oath of office.

Thanks for reading.

Steve