



MEMO

TO: Assembly Committee on Education

FROM: Chris Reader, Executive Vice President of IRG Action Fund

DATE: February 16, 2022

RE: Support for AB 995

Chairman Thiesfeldt and members of the committee,

Thank you for holding this hearing today on these important education reform proposals. My name is Chris Reader, and I'm the Executive Vice President for IRG Action Fund. IRG Action Fund is the advocacy and lobbying partner to the Institute for Reforming Government, a Wisconsin based think tank.

Assembly Bill (AB) 995 empowers parents to truly be in charge of their child's healthcare decisions as it relates to face coverings. Parents should have every right to require their own children to wear face coverings while with other students and adults. Likewise, parents should have the freedom to opt out of requirements that go against the scientific evidence and may threaten children's learning and development. While masks can reduce the spread of COVID-19, they are [less effective](#) the longer people spend time in a room together.¹

Children, who are with their peers every weekday for several hours, also must take masks off to eat together (and for children in childcare settings, to nap), giving COVID-19 plenty of time to spread. However, while masks are unlikely to prevent much spread in these types of situations, they may come with a serious cost, and parents should be allowed to consider those costs.

A recent NPR report [noted](#) that, "Numerous scientific papers have established that it can be harder to hear and understand speech and identify facial expressions and emotions when people are wearing masks."² Education is the primary reason children are in school and so it must be balanced against any real or perceived risks from COVID-19. Fortunately, COVID-19 caused deaths and hospitalization among Wisconsin children have been [near-zero](#)³ over the past two years and the risk is likely to move lower still as older children continue to be vaccinated and if Omicron and other variants prove to be less severe. This bill is an important step towards empowering parents to manage these risks for their children instead of the government.

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/cloth-face-mask-omicron-11640984082>

² <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/28/1075842341/growing-calls-to-take-masks-off-children-in-school>

³ <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/deaths.htm#demographics>

The bill also requires each school district to offer full-time in-person options to all enrolled students. This important clarification ensures that schools do not lock the doors to in-person learning again. Wisconsin families work hard and know what is best for their families. Parents count on their local schools, which they pay for with their hard-earned tax dollars, to remain open and operational so that their children can prepare for their future.

Unfortunately, many school districts across Wisconsin were closed to in-person learning for many weeks and even months after they were able to reopen safely last school year. Even at the start of this year, we saw the largest districts in the state again close their doors to in-person learning, with little or zero notice to families, throwing the lives of families into chaos as parents had to scramble to find childcare or miss work. The impact was more acutely felt by low-income families, already struggling to make ends meet.

At the start of 2021, only 20% of Wisconsin school districts were fully open to in-person learning, five days a week, according to AEI⁴. Schools were disproportionately likely to be closed in low-income areas. This improved during the year; however, by May of 2021, one out of every three school districts were still not fully open to in-person learning. This included two of the state's largest school districts in Milwaukee and Madison. In stark contrast, at the start of 2021, 100% of Florida's school districts were open five days a week to in-person learning.

These school closures not only cost parents a tremendous amount of money, they also stunted the learning and growth of students, and will have unforeseen negative impacts on students' mental health for years to come. Unfortunately, it is well established that the closures were more about politics than public health. Dr. Will Flanders at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty found in early 2021 that the school closures had already cost students future earnings of over \$7 billion⁵. That's generational economic damage that was inflicted upon the children of these closed schools. Dr. Flanders also found that school districts that started virtual saw a great decline in enrollment⁶, as families found alternative education that valued in person instruction – or simply left the education system entirely. And Dr. Flanders found that it was labor unions, not a local presence of COVID-19, that drove district decisions to be open in person or not⁷. More recently, his work has revealed that districts closed for in-person learning had a 4.8% decline in math proficiency, 1.6% decline in English proficiency, and districts with a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students saw the largest declines⁸.

AB 995 is an opportunity for you to empower parents and ensure schools are providing in-person learning for enrolled students. Please support the bill and move it forward to the full Assembly.

⁴ <https://www.returntolearntacker.net/>

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<https://will-law.org/study-spring-2020-school-closures-may-result-in-7-billion-lifetime-earnings-loss-to-wisconsin-students/>

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<https://will-law.org/study-wisconsin-school-districts-that-started-school-year-virtually-experience-greatest-enrollment-declines/>

⁷ <https://will-law.org/study-unions-politics-appear-to-drive-fall-school-reopening-decisions-in-wisconsin/>

⁸ <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CountingTheCost-Final.pdf>