

America's kids unmasked two years later: Examining COVID mandate consequences as students return to class

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As a [new school year](#) starts ramping up, many children nationwide will experience their first day back to school without mask requirements or other COVID-related mandates for the first time in more than two years.

At the start of the new school year in 2021, around 75% of U.S. schools required masking for students or teachers, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#). Now, only a handful of schools are requiring masks.

But for many, the shadow of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) remains. That is especially true in California, where schools implemented some of the strictest COVID policies in the country. The state was also among the last to reopen its schools.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which begins the new school year Monday, nearly reimposed mask mandates and testing over the summer but dropped them

amid major pushback.

CHICAGO PARENTS OUTRAGED AS CITY FACES SCHOOL BUS DRIVER SHORTAGE: 'NOT HOW THIS IS SUPPOSED TO WORK'

Multiple parents who spoke with Fox News Digital said they were relieved that mask mandates have been dropped but say the impact of the past 2 ½ years of COVID policies lingers.

"Isolating children, [especially in Los Angeles](#), socially, academically and emotionally from their peers has had detrimental effects, the likes of which we are only beginning to feel," Daniella Bloom, whose children attend school in the Los Angeles area, told Fox News Digital.

"When you isolate children away from [a seven-hour school day](#), where there are no sports and no social curricular activities, they have no choice but to turn to their electronics," Bloom said. "And there is only darkness there, as they are already vulnerable and going through puberty and susceptible to a lot of groupthink and conformity."

U.S. CDC NO LONGER RECOMMENDS STUDENTS QUARANTINE FOR COVID-19 EXPOSURE

Bloom said kids who are introverted and perhaps prone to anxiety have used the masks as a way to hide from the

world.

The masks, she said, "have gotten them very comfortable to not being exposed to the world."

Another parent, Kristina Irwin, said her oldest son, who was in middle school when COVID hit, went from being a straight-A honors student to "getting all Fs."

"It was two years of lost time," Irwin said. "He literally wouldn't care. And the thing that got me was the teachers didn't care. He would show me on the Zoom videos, the teachers would be slurping up spaghetti ... and then another teacher would be changing a newborn diaper – just a kid screaming in the background. So, it wasn't conducive to learning."

Irwin said she was more hopeful for the year ahead but added, "The fight is not over."

Another parent in the Los Angeles area told Fox News Digital she watched her kids go down a "rabbit hole" of during the pandemic.

"I kept getting so afraid that I'd walk into his room and he wouldn't be with me anymore. He was so depressed. I remember him going into tears because he was so lonely," she said.

Another one of her children finished his senior year as COVID hit and began college at the following school year. But he spiraled into a bout of depression and heavy drug use, not making it through his first semester.

Lance Christensen, who is running for superintendent of public instruction and has five children of his own in public school, said the "hopelessness and despair" set in when children realized what they were losing.

"It wasn't until kids started having this — these long bouts of depression and despair — where they thought, 'If I'm not going to go back to school, if I can't play baseball, if I can't go to the homecoming dance, or if I can't be in the school play, finish playing my music to get that scholarship' — the hopelessness and despair were pretty dramatic," he said.

Christensen told Fox News Digital he's seen, within his own network, "dozens and dozens of kids" whose depression and anxiety skyrocketed.

"I personally know kids who have killed themselves. I know other kids who have attempted suicide in very dramatic ways," he said.

For the months and years ahead, Christensen predicted that many districts and counties would persist in pushing COVID-related policies. He argued that any child who wants to

resume school normally and not be forced to abide by further restrictions "is going to have to push back really hard."

The decline in children's well-being and mental health is reflected in recent studies. According to a recent survey from the , more than four in 10 parents say their children have fallen behind academically.

California enrollment, meanwhile, has sharply declined in part due to COVID quarantining. LAUSD, for instance, says it cannot account for as many as 20,000 students missing from its roster, according to .

For now, many children and parents alike appear to be relieved masks are no longer required. Another parent based in the LA area who wished to remain anonymous said she hopes schools start doing more to build and create community.

"I think you'd find a lot of parents that would be super supportive and will do everything they can to help bring back that sense of community and do more things to get kids socializing because I think that will also help them with their academics and ... child development," she said.

She told Fox News Digital that she saw a major difference in her children's well-being when Los Angeles schools removed

the mask requirement in the spring.

"(My son) said just a couple of weeks ago, 'I can't believe this is what I've been missing out on,'" she said.

Irwin, who is running for , said she is hopeful for the year ahead but remains cautious. She predicted there would be significant pushback if schools tried to reinstate COVID policies such as masking or daily testing.

"I'm going to tell you now, it's not going to work. It's not going to work with the parents. It won't fly," she said.

Bloom, meanwhile, vowed that parents will still be going to school board meetings and fighting against "that could directly interfere with our ability to be parents to our own children."

"The fight is certainly not over," she said. "Someone has to do it, and the California parents are certainly on the front lines of this."