



August 27, 2021

Dr. Miguel Cardona,
Secretary of Education
US Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona,

First, I want to express my heartfelt thanks to you for your strong push to get children back in the classroom all across America. Montana's schools were open last school year and are poised to safely open this school year. Every day, I hear from Montana families that students want to be in the classroom with their peers; I appreciate your support in keeping our schools open.

Recently, Montana Senator Steve Daines wrote to CDC Director Rochelle Walensky regarding the federally sweeping mask mandate for school buses. The Senator expressed Montana's need for local control to best serve our students and families. Senator Daines knows Montana's population and geography well, understands the local control approach, and understands that parents and teachers must be allowed the opportunity to make decisions based on the individual needs of children.

Montana has a wide range of busing routes. Ronan Public Schools have the longest daily route of 269.9 miles per day, compared to the bus route of Lockwood Public Schools, which is two miles. A one-size-fits-all masking mandate nullifies the voices of students, parents, and teachers and is not in the best interest of Montana families. It also creates for inconsistency for these students, who must wear masks on the bus, but not in the classroom, where masking is currently optional.

In your March letter, "Working Together for Students," you stated that "from a federal perspective, our role is to provide support, guidance, and direction on how to [reopen schools] safely." In your April letter to our teachers, you said, "I urge state, local, and elected officials to make sure classroom teachers have a voice in your plans and efforts to reimagine education; second to parents, they know our students best." So, I urge you and your federal agency partners to continue in your roles by providing support and strategies instead of top-down mandates, and by allowing our teachers and parents to make these very important safety mitigation decisions.

Sincerely,

Superintendent Elsie Arntzen

cc: CDC Director Rochelle Walensky, Governor Greg Gianforte, Representative Matt Rosendale, Senator Steve Daines, Senator Jon Tester

