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POWAY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

February 18, 2022

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor of California
1021 O St, Suite 9000
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dr. Tomás Aragón
Director, California Department of Public Health
State Public Health Officer
PO Box 997377, MS 0500
Sacramento, CA 95899-7377

Dr. Wilma Wooten
San Diego County Public Health Officer
1700 Pacific Hwy #311
San Diego, CA 92101

Dear Governor Newsom, Dr. Aragón, and Dr. Wooten,

On March 13, 2022, it will be two years since school campuses first had to close due to COVID-19. Over the past two years, school districts, staff, students, and families have had to make enormous life-altering changes and sacrifices for our schools to re-open safely for in-person learning. Despite all the obstacles - including severe staffing shortages, countless public health mandates and orders, and unprecedented criticism, abuse, threats, and political interference - our school communities managed to come together and accomplish what seemed impossible. We have endured multiple waves of the virus, various spikes and variants, along with a constant change to guidance and requirements from local, state, and national agencies. Now is the time to further refine the California SMARTER Plan with regards to returning our schools to normalcy. Delaying a decision as it pertains to mask mandates beyond February 28th only serves to further exacerbate the challenges we are experiencing.

We are currently in a state of emergency within our own school districts. We have students protesting at alarming, growing numbers. We have staffing shortages, with teachers and staff being subjected to constant stress and verbal abuse. In addition to all this, we have local businesses incentivizing students' actions of civil disobedience with rewards if the students defy the mandates. The range of students and parents who have previously supported our efforts are now angry and no longer being tolerant and cooperative. The mask mandate changes in other states and the perception of mixed messages from public figures have made the enforcement of mask mandates nearly impossible.

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Educators are neither epidemiologists nor public health experts, yet through it all, we have been required to act as public health officials with vaccinations, testing, and enforcing all the mandates/public health guidelines that apply to public schools. In the face of repeated demands from staff and community members for us to defy these mandates, we have had to explain to our communities that failure to do so would risk closure and institutional or personal legal liability. This has come at a great cost to our staff and students. Our students' and staff's mental health is suffering. Staff is exhausted. Parents are divided. Trust has eroded.

We have all done our part. In the Poway Unified School District, nearly 85% of our school site employees are vaccinated. In San Diego County, vaccination rates are high, with 85% of the population vaccinated, and 78% of 12–19-year-olds vaccinated. However, with the lifting of the Statewide indoor mask mandate on February 15, 2022, school districts are now caught in the middle of a very difficult and escalating situation, where enforcing the continued mask mandates has become nearly impossible.

Students and their families are protesting daily, refusing to wear masks at schools. Our already-taxed teachers and administrators should not and cannot be the mask police. Students should not and cannot be excluded from their education. The angst and conflict over masks have become an extreme distraction at our schools.

Here at Poway Unified, we want to remain focused on the goal of providing safe, welcoming, and equitable learning environments for all our students. We have done all that we can do to comply with state mandates over the last two years, but we need your immediate help. We need the Governor and CDPH to publicly announce a timeline for easing school masking requirements, using county health data. As of mid-February, San Diego County COVID-19 case rates and hospitalizations have fallen rapidly following the recent Omicron spike. We urge you to act quickly, before February 28, 2022, to prevent an even greater crisis which is already growing rapidly in many school districts throughout the state.

Respectfully,



Marian Kim Phelps, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Poway Unified School District