



KENAI PENINSULA BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

Office of Superintendent

John O'Brien, Superintendent

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Phone (907) 714-8888

April 9, 2021

Dear Mayor Pierce,

I learned about your social media post and interview with KSRM news about mask mandates in KPBSD schools on Friday morning, and my immediate response was, "What?"

First, I am surprised that you did not call me, email me, or walk down the hall to talk face-to-face prior to going public with your opinion that, "The time has come for us to get rid of all Mask Mandates in schools." If we had talked, I would have listened to you, and I would have shared the rest of the story about inaccurate assertions. I would have shared the mitigation plans and updates KPBSD has made and is making. KSRM asked you what Superintendent John O'Brien would say. My responses follow direct quotes (italics) from your Facebook page post or KSRM interview:

1) *"The time has come for us to get rid of all Mask Mandates in schools. Kids are being forced to wear masks all day in schools in the Kenai Peninsula Borough...."*

This statement is not true. Earlier this week (effective April 7, 2021), the school district relaxed the mask requirement for outside recess, outdoor PE classes, and outdoor class activities. Related to outdoor sports, when athletes practice or compete outside they have not been required to wear face coverings when actively participating.

2) *"I am proud that the Kenai Peninsula Borough has some of the lowest COVID numbers in Alaska...."*

This is not entirely accurate. The Kenai Peninsula Borough positive COVID-19 cases had been coming down, but those numbers recently increased to the point that according to the State of Alaska, we are now in RED (High Risk). There are twelve (12) Health Regions in the State of Alaska, and as of today (Friday, April 9, 2021) seven (7) are currently operating in what the State of Alaska considers to be RED or High Risk regarding COVID-19 case numbers and community transmission. The Kenai Peninsula is one of these regions now in High Risk.

3) *“There is no more emergency declaration at the state level, we have access to the vaccine, and there is no need to force kids to wear a mask during school...”* The State let the emergency declaration lapse, but I believe that was a political and economic decision, not one entirely based on medical or epidemiological recommendations. Over half of our State Health Regions are in RED (High Risk) as I type this letter. It is true that citizens ages 16 and older have access to a vaccine. However, these are also important facts for consideration:

- The majority of students in the Kenai Peninsula Borough are under the age of 16 and cannot access a vaccine at this time.
- In 2021, in the last four months, the number of COVID-19 cases in Alaska children under the age of 10 has more than doubled. The number is now 4,423.
- In Alaska youth age 10-19, there have been 3,692 new cases in the last four months. More Alaska children are now getting sick from COVID-19 and some have become seriously ill enough to cause hospitalization.

4) *“We’ve had no flu diagnoses, have we? We haven’t had any flu this year. Where’d the flu go? What happened to the flu?”* It is wonderful that cases of influenza are down this year! This is because of the five proven mitigation measures that we have been taking: universal and correct use of masks; physical distancing; frequent handwashing and sanitation; extra cleaning of surfaces and facilities; and people staying home from school or work when they are sick.

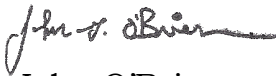
5) *“I think it’s time that O’Brien and the board look at the actual numbers, allow folks to come back into meeting rooms and meet with them, and let’s get back to as normal living experience as we can on the Peninsula.”* For several months, our Board of Education has held its monthly hybrid school board meeting at Kenai Central High School, offering options for both in-person attendance and testimony, or the ability to participate via zoom or a telephone call. I am happy to meet with anyone in a meeting room (as long as they follow our protocols and wear a mask), and our offices are open.

I also would like to share with you that every superintendent and school district in the State of Alaska currently requires students and staff to wear masks while indoors in school facilities. The only exceptions may be very small communities, off the road system, that do not have any positive cases. The Center for Disease Control has stated that it is, “critical that schools use and layer the five key prevention strategies” that I mentioned above. The CDC goes on to state, “Schools providing in-person instruction should prioritize two prevention strategies:

- 1) Universal and correct use of masks should be required, and
- 2) Physical distancing should be maximized to the greatest extent possible.”

I do not discount the high concern parents, staff, children, and the community have about wearing a face covering. However, the highest priority of my administration is the responsibility to educate and keep our students, staff, and the entire KPBS community safe during the pandemic. We will continue to do so. When the time comes to remove masks, that update will be welcomed and made. Now is not yet the time, and under my leadership, KPBSD will not be the lone ranger school district in the state to do so, even with political pressure. I hope that this letter provides further insight about what KPBSD is doing. I continue to be open to talking to you in person, via video call, on the phone, or via email. If you have questions about anything I have stated, please reach out to me directly.

Sincerely,



John O'Brien
Superintendent