

Mask Exemption Considerations

Are masks safe to wear all day? Yes. There are many studies that show masks are effective and safe. Only mild and rare side effects have been seen, such as skin irritation, headaches, and general discomfort. There is no evidence that wearing a mask is dangerous and causes hypoxia (low oxygen levels) or hypercapnia (high carbon dioxide levels) in healthy individuals, even when multiple masks are layered on top of each other. It is safe for individuals to wear a face mask even if they have a health condition like asthma or allergies. In fact, wearing a surgical mask during exercise has been used as a treatment to reduce exercise-induced asthma. Many children with developmental disabilities have other medical conditions that may place them at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19. Wearing a mask is protective for these children.

Is a cloth face covering the same thing as a face mask?

Yes. A cloth face covering is also called a face mask. A cloth face covering or face mask:

- covers the nose and mouth without openings that can be seen through
- is made of synthetic or natural fabrics
- secures under the chin
- fits snugly against the nose and sides of the face
- does **not** have an exhalation valve or vent.

How do I get a mask exemption for my child?

Parents need to get a medical directive from their child's healthcare provider stating the child has a known medical or mental health condition or other disability and can't wear a mask during school or needs other accommodations. At SFASD, the STUDENT MASK EXEMPTION REQUEST FORM (available on the website) is required to be completed and emailed to the student's school nurse prior to the start of in-person attendance.

Who can sign the medical directive?

A medical directive exempting an individual from wearing a mask while at school must be provided by a licensed healthcare provider. A licensed healthcare provider includes a Doctor of Medicine (MD), Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO), Physician Assistant (PA), or Advanced Practice Registered Nurse (APRN).

Can an exemption be granted based on parent request alone?

No, SFASD requires mask exemption documentation from a Doctor of Medicine (MD), Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO), Physician Assistant (PA), or Advanced Practice Registered Nurse (APRN).

Does a student still need a medical exemption if he or she already has an IEP or 504 Plan and the medical exemption relates to the disability identified in the existing plan?

Due to the potential health risks involved with not wearing a mask, we will still require the STUDENT MASK EXEMPTION REQUEST FORM be completed for consistency across our district except in rare instance that the current IEP or 504 Plan absolutely necessitates exemption. The determination can be made by the IEP/504 team (with parental involvement), based on the child's disability and medical diagnosis. The mask exemption will be documented in the child's IEP or 504 Plan as a revision.

Should a school create a 504 Plan for a student who obtains a medical exemption to the mask requirement?

No. The mask requirement and the medical directive for exemption are generally applicable admission requirements issued by public health authorities. The public health order is a state law and is similar to

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the current state vaccination requirement, although temporary. A school is not required to implement all of the procedures of 504 such as evaluation, team meetings, 504 Plan, etc., in response to a student's medical mask exemption. It is merely an exemption to the temporary mask requirement. However, if the parent indicates that the student's medical condition is causing problems beyond the masking requirement, school officials should clarify with the parent whether a formal 504 evaluation is being requested or is necessary.

Will parents be notified if someone in their child's class is not wearing a mask or is exempt from wearing a mask?

No. It is up to the school to enforce mask wearing among their student body and staff.

Do students with disabilities need special accommodations related to this order?

Students with a medical condition, mental health condition, or disability that prevent them from wearing a face covering, including individuals with a medical condition for whom wearing a face covering could cause harm or obstruct breathing, or who is unconscious, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to remove a face covering without assistance are exempt from this order. A school may require an individual to provide a medical directive verifying the need for an exemption. Anyone who is deaf or hard of hearing, or anyone who is communicating with someone who is deaf or hard of hearing where the ability to see the mouth is essential for communication, may use a face shield or alternative protection. School districts and charters are required to systematically review all current plans (Individual Healthcare Plans, Individualized Education Program, or Section 504 plans) for accommodating students with special healthcare needs and update their care plans as needed to decrease their risk for exposure to COVID-19.

What are some examples of times when people need adaptations or alternatives to a face mask while at school?

It may be hard for some people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental health conditions, or other sensory sensitivities to wear a face mask. They should talk to their doctor or healthcare provider for advice about wearing a face mask and if appropriate a medical directive should be created. In any case where a student or staff member has received an exemption, it is very important that other prevention measures are in place including physical distancing, washing your hands often, and cleaning and disinfecting surfaces that are touched often. People who rely on lip reading to communicate may not be able to wear a face mask (such as someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, or someone who cares for or interacts with a person who is hearing impaired). Students and teachers who are participating in speech therapy where the ability to see the mouth is essential for communication may also need adaptations or alternatives to a face mask. In these situations, ● Consider using a clear face covering. ● If a clear face covering isn't available, consider whether you can: ○ Use written communication ○ Use closed captioning ○ Decrease background noise to make it possible to communicate if you are wearing a cloth face covering that blocks your lips. ● Consider using a plexiglass barrier. ● Maintain a physical distance of 6 feet from other people. ● If a face shield must be worn, make sure it wraps around your face and goes below your chin. When you are not communicating, you should put your face mask back on. A face shield is not a substitute for a face mask.

What if a student who does not qualify for an exemption refuses to wear a face covering?

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The public health order has the same authority/force as a law during the time it is enacted. Failure to comply with the order is a misdemeanor. The order requires all students, K-12 to wear masks. As face coverings are required, if a student does not qualify for one of the outlined exemptions, it is assumed the student would not be allowed on the bus or to be physically present in school. This exclusion will last until the public health order expires or the student decides to begin wearing a face mask at school. While school staff should respectfully recognize a parent or student's opinion, and handle the situation with compassion, the public health order is clear and the student who does not qualify for an exemption can be sent home from school and should be informed of alternative educational opportunities available. Schools must be careful to equitably implement the order. For example: if all students seeking a medical exemption are required to provide a medical provider's note, then all students should be held to the same standard. Exceptions should not be made based on subjective factors such as trustworthiness of the student, a history of difficulty communicating with a parent, or familial relationships with the student. Another example might be if the school provides a disposable mask for a student the first time the student forgets to bring a mask. The school must not discriminate when mitigating non-compliance.