



Communication • Advocacy • Equal Access

Pete Ricketts
Governor

Jeremy Fitzpatrick
Chairperson of the Board
Omaha

Candice Arteaga
Vice Chair
Greenwood

Dr. Stacie Ray
Secretary
Lincoln

Frances Beurivage
Board Member
Lincoln

Robert Feit
Board Member
Lincoln

Jonathan Scherling
Board Member
Omaha

Diane Schutt
Board Member
Fairbury

Sandra Shaw
Board Member
Seward

Norman Weverka
Board Member
Brainard

John Wyvill
Executive Director
john.wyvill@nebraska.gov

June 16, 2020

Commissioner Matthew Blomstedt
301 Centennial Mall South
P.O. Box 94987
Lincoln, NE 68509

Dear Commissioner Blomstedt,

During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, communication access has been the biggest topic within the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. Face masks have become the norm to protect ourselves and others. However, this also can make communication more challenging. I am writing to you requesting clear face masks become the *new* norm, not the exception.

The Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NCDHH) strongly advises your district to consider this effective communication access strategy when taking the next steps on deciding how to protect our students for the 2020-2021 school year. Wearing a traditional mask covering your lips and half of your face can take away critical aspects of communication access in order to receive visual cues needed for understanding. The most frequently used signing space for American Sign Language (ASL) users is by their face. Hiding part of those features is detrimental to our students. Non-ASL users will rely heavily on lip reading from educators as well as their peers. This is why clear face masks need to be the standard for all schools to use when thinking of next school year.

If there is no communication plan in process for the return of school this fall, in any setting, students will suffer academically as well as emotionally. Instead of focusing on their homework, they may be struggling to figure out any communication or directions they missed during class, isolation from their peers, and other barriers.

We recognize this next school year will create challenges and unknowns for educators, parents and students. In an effort to advocate and lessen one of the challenges this new year will bring, we stress the importance of clear face masks and a communication strategy for students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

Sincerely,

John C. Wyvill
Executive Director

CC: Jeremy Fitzpatrick, NCDHH Board Chair