

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

August 17, 2021

Governor Baker,

I write to urge you to take the necessary, commonsense steps that will reduce the spread of the coronavirus in our public schools and congregate settings and save lives. Since the start of the pandemic, more than 733,000 of our neighbors have contracted COVID-19 and more than 18,000 have died from the deadly disease.¹ It is incumbent upon all of us in government and your administration to do all that we can to prevent further suffering, trauma and loss, which means recognizing the important roles of masks and vaccines in protecting vulnerable residents, including those across the Massachusetts 7th Congressional District. In this moment, Massachusetts requires leadership that is guided by science and centers the communities most impacted.

The ongoing pandemic continues to pose a serious threat to our constituents. While I have helped secure billions in federal funding to support our public health infrastructure, small businesses, workers and families, the coronavirus continues to endanger the lives of residents. The seven-day average of COVID cases and hospitalizations have been steadily rising over the past few weeks.² And every county in Massachusetts is at high or substantial risk of COVID-19 transmission.³ According to your own Department of Public Health, there have been approximately 10,000 breakthrough cases of COVID-19, nearly 500 hospitalizations, and more than 100 deaths among vaccinated individuals across Massachusetts.⁴ These numbers should serve as clear evidence that the Commonwealth's current approach is inadequate in the face of the highly contagious delta variant and we must change course before it is too late. We know that those who remain most vulnerable are those we are unvaccinated. Therefore, we must take necessary steps to overcome ongoing access barriers and combat misinformation. The vaccines are safe, effective, and life-saving.

In order to inform our ongoing public health response, I urge your administration to resume comprehensive data collection on who is contracting COVID-19. Your decision to stop reporting all of the necessary data at the exact same time the delta variant began infecting residents was misguided and must be reversed. I continue to lead the charge in Congress for mandatory reporting of anonymized and disaggregated data because I know it will help ensure resources are

¹ *Tracking Coronavirus in Massachusetts*, NY TIMES (Aug. 16, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/massachusetts-covid-cases.html>.

² *COVID-19 Response Reporting*, COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS (Aug. 16, 2021), <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-response-reporting>.

³ *All 14 counties in Mass. At high or substantial risk of COVID-19 transmission, CDC says*, WCVB BOSTON (Aug. 15, 2021), <https://www.wcvb.com/article/massachusetts-cdc-covid-19-community-transmission-levels-august-15-2021/37311450>.

⁴ *Nearly 10,000 Breakthrough COVID Cases Reported in Mass.*, 10 BOSTON (Aug. 11, 2021), <https://www.nbcboston.com/news/local/nearly-10000-breakthrough-covid-cases-reported-in-mass-over-100-have-now-died/2464309/>.

getting to hardest hit communities and save lives. There is no substitute for robust, equitable data collection and disclosure. Thus, I urge you to adopt science-backed reporting guidelines for residents of all ages, including cases in schools, especially before the school year begins and the projected fall surge follows.⁵

As families and educators prepare for the return to physical classrooms and in-person learning, it is time for you to implement a statewide school mask mandate that safeguards our students, our teachers, and our communities from greater risk of COVID-19 infection. Doctors are sharing grave warnings that demand policy action. Requiring masks in schools would be in alignment with recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance, recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics and is supported by the Massachusetts Teachers Association, the largest teacher's union in the Commonwealth.⁶ Additionally, many states have taken this step, including neighboring Connecticut, because they know school district boundaries cannot contain the virus.⁷ As Governor, you have an obligation to enact a uniform policy that is backed by science and reflects the scale of the crisis.

When you signed the first mask mandate on May 1, 2020, there were 2,106 new COVID-19 cases in our state.⁸ Last week, on August 9, 2021, there were 2,652 new cases. The science hasn't changed: masks offer vital protection and help slow the spread of the coronavirus. A mask mandate made sense then and it makes sense now, particularly for high transmission indoor settings.

In addition, vaccine mandates are a necessary tool to safeguard vulnerable populations. The federal government has provided emergency authorization for multiple vaccines that provide significant defense against the coronavirus. You undoubtedly recognize the utility of vaccine mandates, as evinced by your most recent public health emergency order requiring nursing home personnel to be vaccinated.⁹ However, that order should urgently be extended to other settings where COVID-19 transmission is highly probable and extremely dangerous, such as hospitals, schools and prisons. Because many classrooms, filled with unvaccinated children and lacking proper ventilation, have the potential to be petri dishes for the coronavirus, there is growing support by educators and public health experts for requiring vaccination for all school personnel.¹⁰ There needs to be a clear equitable approach that leaves no resident of the Commonwealth behind.

⁵ *Pandemic model predicts big national COVID surge*, BOSTON 25 (July 22, 2021), <https://www.boston25news.com/news/health/pandemic-model-predicts-big-national-covid-surge/4V4FYRIJDFGOVNCIS5ZLQLSZ6I/>.

⁶ *MTA Board calls on governor and DESE to require masks in schools and colleges*, MASSACHUSETTS TEACHERS ASSOCIATION (Aug. 2, 2021), <https://massteacher.org/current-initiatives/coronavirus-and-schools>.

⁷ *10 States Have School Mask Mandates While 8 Forbid Them*, PEW (Aug. 10, 2021), <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2021/08/10/10-states-have-school-mask-mandates-while-8-forbid-them>.

⁸ *Tracking Coronavirus in Massachusetts*, NY TIMES (Aug. 16, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/massachusetts-covid-cases.html>.

⁹ *COVID-19 Public Health Emergency Order No. 2021-4*, COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS (Aug. 4, 2021), <https://www.mass.gov/doc/order-of-the-commissioner-of-public-health-regarding-the-requirement-for-nursing-home-personnel-to-be-vaccinated-against-covid-19/download>.

¹⁰ *Boston teachers union takes lead in embracing vaccine mandates*, COMMONWEALTH (Aug. 11, 2021), <https://commonwealthmagazine.org/education/boston-teachers-union-takes-lead-in-embracing-vaccine-mandates/>.

In a January 26 letter, I wrote, “It is absolutely vital that policymakers at all levels of government heed the calls of the communities most impacted by this pandemic and the public health experts that are fighting this virus on the frontlines.” I meant those words then, and I mean them now. Reducing the spread of the coronavirus should be considered the greatest priority, and I look forward to partnering with you to accomplish this goal.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ayanna S. Pressley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress