

Dr. Walensky's Favorite Mask Study
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According to Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the science is clear – wearing masks at school protects children. A lot. In fact, she says, schools that do not mandate masks have a three times greater risk of COVID-19 outbreaks than schools in which children are masked up.

Walensky has access to enormous resources. The CDC has an annual budget of \$15.4 billion dollars.¹ The agency has thousands of employees who are supposedly charged with protecting "...America from health, safety and security threats," and is supposed to "...save lives and protect people from health threats." According to a CDC website titled Mission, Role and Pledge "...CDC conducts critical science and provides health information that protects our nation..."² So we, as taxpayers who fund the CDC, should expect Dr. Walensky to have access to and report the very best science available on important topics like masking our children in school.

The CDC currently recommends that all children ages 2 and older should be masked at school.³ In order to support this stance, Dr. Walensky has appeared as a guest on dozens of television shows, citing a study conducted in Arizona.⁴ This study was published in the CDC's journal, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*. Walensky says that the study, which looked at data from almost 1000 Arizona schools, shows that schools without mask mandates were three times more likely to have outbreaks of COVID-19 than schools that enforced a mask mandate.⁵ This sounds compelling, but a closer look at the study shows otherwise.

Here are just a few of the issues, many of which were identified by an investigative reporter at *The Atlantic*, David Zweig:⁶

The authors report that they looked at the association between school mask policies and COVID-19 outbreaks between July 15 and August 31 2021. The school year does start early in Arizona, but the start date for Arizona schools was highly variable in 2021. Some schools opened in mid-to-late July, while others did not start until mid-August. The obvious problem is that some schools had as much as twice the time to develop an outbreak as others.

The definition of an outbreak was problematic too. The authors defined an outbreak as two or more cases in students and staff within a 14-day period. There are two issues with this – the low threshold for reporting an outbreak, and the 14-day period which means that, depending on the start-date for the school year, there is no way to determine that transmission actually took place at school.

According to a former member of the CDC's Epidemic Intelligence Service, Louise Anne McNutt, guidelines in Maricopa County required that only unmasked children in close contact with infected children be tested; masked children were not tested. This results in detection bias, which could impact the results. It's important to note that McNutt favors masking, yet reports that this study does not show that mask mandates reduce transmission.

Yet another expert, Jason Abaluck, who was the lead investigator for a randomized trial of masking involving 340,000 people, called the study "ridiculous" because the researchers did not control for the vaccination status of staff or students, or other mitigation strategies such as improved ventilation.

According to the paper, 782 of the 999 public schools in Maricopa County were included in the data set. However, through a public records request, the Arizona Department of Education provided Zweig with the same list of schools that was given to the researchers, and it included 40 virtual learning academies, 20 preschools and 90 vocational programs. This meant that there could be only 740 schools included in the study, not 782.

Even more concerning, Zweig reports that he repeatedly asked the authors and *MMWR* to provide a list of schools included in the study and to provide the raw data. Both the journal and the authors refused, and replied, "*MMWR* is committed to quickly correcting errors when they are identified. We reviewed the specific items that you describe below and found no errors." When pressed further, the authors shared the list, which included three schools in another county, one virtual academy, one preschool and over 80 vocational programs that are not schools.

The bottom line is clear. This study has so many flaws that it should never have been published. It should have been retracted as soon as others started pointing out the inconsistencies in the data set. It is difficult to attribute this to error and seems more like outright fraud. It is almost incomprehensible that a medical doctor, Walensky, would use this study again, and again – and again – to support her guidelines. How did this happen? Did she read the study? Or was she provided with talking points and never read it herself? Did she read it and not understand it? Or did she understand it and decide to mislead the public? Is Walensky an incompetent doctor, or is she a competent criminal? She's a powerful person and either answer is a bit terrifying.

¹ CDC Statement on President's Fiscal Year 2022 Budget. CDC Newsroom May 28 2021

² Centers for Disease Control. Mission, Role and Pledge.

³ Centers for Disease Control. Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools. January 13 2002

⁴ CBS News. Transcript: CDC Director Rochelle Walensky on "Face the Nation," September 26, 2021 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-cdc-director-rochelle-walensky-face-the-nation-09-26-2021/>

⁵ Centers for Disease Control. Association Between K-12 School Mask Policies and School-Associated COVID-19 Outbreaks – Maricopa and Pima Counties, Arizona, July-August 2021. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)* October 1 2021

⁶ David Zweig. The CDC's Flawed Case for Wearing Masks in School. *The Atlantic* December 16 2021