

# Anti-maskers are putting their facial freedom over our kids. And I'm furious.

By Petula Dvorak

Columnist

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He had the bouncy-knee nerves.

Of course he did. The start of freshman year is terrifying.

But on Monday, as I took the photos of my younger son on his first day of high school (“Smile! Oh wait, never mind — can’t see it through the mask.”), I didn’t have the usual prayers about the typical things reeling in a parent’s head:

“Let him love his classes.”

“Please let his teachers be a good fit.”

“Please, *please* be nice to him, other kids.”

Instead, I am simmering with rage.

I am furious at the selfish, outrageous, stubborn anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers who are putting their performative, ill-informed political crusades ahead of America’s children.

I am livid that what should’ve been the joyous return to classes and the start of my children’s freshman and senior years were noncommittal, shoulder-shrugging days of *maybe* and *whatever*.

“Maybe it’ll be a real school year,” my (already misanthropic) senior said, on his first day back to class last week.

“Maybe it’ll be back to screen hell again.”

Because just as we seemed to have this pandemic tamed, when the vaccine lines were hopping and vaccinated families and friends could safely hug again, America’s deplorable political divisions U-turned the nation’s progress and put kids at the back of the line.

The nation reached an average of 100,000 hospitalizations daily this week — the first time it was this high since the winter peak, according to data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. An average of about 1,000 Americans are dying every day, adding to more than 636,000 Americans already killed by the virus.

In America’s low-vaccination-rate states (mostly in the South), pediatric ICUs are at or near capacity.

Vaccinations could’ve prevented the surge that is cramming those hospitals.

“It’s absolutely due to delta; it’s absolutely due to unvaccinated people,” David Wohl, a specialist in infectious diseases at the University of North Carolina, told my colleagues at The Washington Post. “There is an incredible increase in

nospitalizations across the spectrum, from just needing oxygen and some care to needing serious interventions to keep people alive. If everyone was vaccinated, our hospitals would not be anywhere near where we are.”

The earliest deaths in the pandemic, when there were no vaccines available, were heartbreaking — the elderly, first responders, workers who couldn’t shelter in place and work from home.

But this new surge is fueled by the willfully ignorant and is almost entirely political, led by several dozen GOP lawmakers on Capitol Hill and two governors who are more interested in making a scene than doing their jobs.

“We might as well start calling this a Perma-demic,” Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-Colo.) tweeted last month, after a congressional mask mandate was announced. “Permanent masking. Permanent state of emergency. Permanent control. This will go on until the American people just say enough is enough. The tyrants aren’t giving this up!”

What exactly do the “tyrants” get out of mandating one of the things demonstrated to help stop the spread of the coronavirus? I doubt this is all a vast left-wing conspiracy of mask fetishists getting off on seeing people overuse their eyebrows and fog their glasses.

The debates are so heated, they’re turning violent, with a Texas dad ripping the mask off a teacher during a school meet-and-greet, a California dad smacking a teacher who wasn’t masked up in a faculty lounge and a man in Iowa who attacked an eyeglass store employee who asked him to pull his mask up over his nose and was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

They invoke righteous ideals about freedom and choice while refusing to take part in the social compact that considers the health and liberty of all.

What are the chances that the same people who loudly boast of honoring the men and women of the military for their sacrifices are unwilling to sacrifice their own comfort for the life, health and well-being of the nation’s children?

The delta variant is a horrific twist on this pandemic because — unlike the original version of virus we met last year — it is more contagious and is more likely to find hosts in the young, those chubby-armed and sweet-faced kids who aren’t old enough for vaccines.

I feel terrible for the place those parents are in (and not just because they’re still in the juice-box-and-goldfish-crackers years). My colleague Theresa Vargas spoke to that fear for her young boys.

I’m lucky that my children are vaccinated and, though still susceptible to a breakthrough infection, largely protected from the toll the virus would otherwise take on their bodies.

But they’re not protected from the social and emotional toll that more shutdowns would take on their minds.

It was horrible to watch our kids wilt, crash and burn after months in front of a screen. We all shudder at the thought of going back to that — but it’s a real possibility if the anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers continue feeding the virus.

“Why is this a thing, mom?” my 14-year-old said at the dinner table the night before school started, after one of us said that mask fights probably won’t be a thing in blue D.C., where masks have been mandated indoors for the vaccinated and the unvaccinated for weeks. “How can this be political? What’s political about trying to stop a virus?”

Just about all of these Maskless Marys and Vaxless Vinces already have had their shots at senior year, kindergarten, prom, graduation, the spring concert, the homecoming game. But through their selfish narcissism, their reckless actions may have a hand in derailing my children’s school year.

There’s nothing more un-American than that.

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