

**Reopening Health and Safety Requirements:
Supporting Students with Disabilities who have Communication Challenges
When Face Coverings are a Requirement During In-person Instruction**

On June 24, 2020, under Executive Order No. 147¹, all people are required to wear face coverings in a variety of settings, whether inside or outside unless an exception applies. And, under Plan B for the reopening of North Carolina public schools, all students Kindergarten through 12th grade, teachers, staff, and adult visitors are required to wear a cloth face covering unless an exception applies^{2,3}. While face masks assist with source control, they can impact effective communication and learning for students with disabilities in North Carolina public schools. Cloth face coverings worn by communication partners may contribute to miscommunication, frustration, and social communication stress and anxiety for students in the following ways:

Face Coverings	Potential Impact for the Student
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Degrade and distort the speech signal⁴ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce auditory attention Increase auditory and visual fatigue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conceal mouth movements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inability to speech read Increase auditory and visual fatigue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conceal facial features and expressions essential for understanding context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inability to read facial cues needed for social communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase visual complexity of the human face 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce visual attention Increase visual fatigue/avoidance Increase visual novelty Impact contrast sensitivity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distort intersensory attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decrease ability to locate a speaker effectively Poses potential safety hazard

What can be done to meet the current, necessary requirements for face coverings and maintain effective communication and access to the curriculum for students with disabilities during face-to-face instruction? The following are some examples of reasonable accommodations to consider making on behalf of a student that may be experiencing challenges with communication partners who are wearing face coverings:

Accommodation Considerations	Potential Impact for the Student
Teachers and other school staff may:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wear Assistive Listening Systems while wearing a face covering^{5,6,7} 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improves speech signal Increases auditory attention Decreases auditory fatigue



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improves social communication challenges Reduces effects of background noise and reverberation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wear an FDA approved transparent face mask⁸ or fabric mask with transparent window⁹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows for speech reading Improves social communication challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wear a face shield, if necessary, in accordance with CDC guidelines¹⁰ 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use a consistent, one-color cloth face covering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce visual novelty and complexity Helps student identify familiar staff members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use written or tactile communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improves access allowing student to make connections to verbal content Improves overall communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use closed captioning for pre-recorded videos 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use remote services^{11,12} (e.g. remote interpreting, speech-to-text services, automatic speech recognition software, Communication Access Real-time Translation – CART) 	

When considering potential accommodations, an IEP Team needs to determine what accommodations or modifications meet the unique needs of an individual student and document appropriately in the IEP.

¹ [NC Executive Order No. 147](#)

² [Strong Schools NC Public Health Toolkit \(K-12\)](#)

³ [Lighting Our Way Forward: North Carolinas Guidebook for Reopening Public Schools](#)

⁴ [How do Medical Masks Degrade Speech Reception?](#)

⁵ [How to Improve Communication Through Barriers and Masks](#)

⁶ [Helping Our Clients Parse Speech Through Masks During COVID-19](#)

⁷ [The Effects of Face Coverings and Remote Microphone Technology on Speech Perception in the Classroom](#)

⁸ [FDA Approved Transparent Mask](#)

⁹ [National Deaf Center](#)

¹⁰ [CDC Considerations for Wearing Masks](#)

¹¹ [National Deaf Center: Frequently Asked Questions](#)

¹² [National Deaf Center: Remote Services](#)

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