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# PRESS RELEASE

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## **Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Riley Extends Mask Requirement in Schools**

MALDEN – Today, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) announced that after consulting with medical experts and state health officials, Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Jeffrey C. Riley notified school districts in the Commonwealth that he will extend the mask requirement in all K-12 public schools through at least January 15, 2022.

The Department, in collaboration with medical experts and state health officials, will continue to evaluate and consider other criteria that could be used in the future to lift the mask requirement based on public health data.

“Massachusetts is a national leader in vaccination rates for adults and eligible children, and in anticipation of the vaccine becoming available in the coming weeks for children ages 5 to 11 years old, this extension of the mask requirement will allow time for the elementary school population to receive the COVID-19 vaccine,” **said Education Secretary James Peyser**. “This will be

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"Masks remain a simple and effective measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and keep students in school safely," **said Commissioner Riley.**

"Together with the Test and Stay program, high vaccination rates, low transmission rates in schools and all the hard work in keeping our students safe, our kids are able to stay in school where they belong and can flourish."

School officials will continue to be able to lift the mask requirement if they can demonstrate that at least 80 percent of all students and staff in a school building are vaccinated after submitting documentation to DESE. Lifting the mask mandate through the vaccination threshold is a local decision made by school and district leaders if they choose to take advantage it.

The following mask requirements will remain in effect:

- Public school students ages 5 and older in all grades and staff are required to wear masks indoors in schools, except when eating, drinking or during mask breaks.
- All visitors are also expected to wear a mask in school buildings, regardless of vaccination status.
- Masks are not required outdoors.
- It is strongly recommended that students younger than 5 also wear a mask in school.
- Students and staff who cannot wear a mask for medical reasons, and students who cannot wear a mask for behavioral reasons are exempted from this requirement.

All districts are required this school year to provide in-person learning to all students. Since the start of the year, approximately 920,000 public school students have been learning in schools with minimal disruptions. In addition to masking, this progress has been possible thanks to school communities working together to participate in the state's COVID-19 testing program, combined with high vaccination rates among eligible populations.

Massachusetts has become a national model for surveillance and rapid testing in schools. More than 2,200 public and private schools have opted into either one or multiple forms of testing that the state is providing free to all schools. DESE and the Executive Office of Health and Human Services launched a groundbreaking Test and Stay program for students identified as close contacts in school, allowing students to be tested daily and remain in class if they test

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In August, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education gave the commissioner the authority to require masks for public school staff and students (ages 5 and above) in all grades through at least October 1, 2021. The commissioner said he would revise the requirement as warranted by public health data.

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