

Talking Points & FAQs:

Lifting the Statewide School Mask Requirement

Background

- Over the past two years, students, educators, school employees, and their families have remained flexible and adapted to changing health and safety guidance as public health experts continued to learn more about COVID-19.
- Across the state, school districts have prepared for changes to our mitigation strategy over the past two years with:
 - A COVID-19 vaccination requirement for all school employees,
 - Vaccinations for individuals ages 5+ widely available,
 - One of the most robust school COVID-19 testing systems in the country,
 - Improved ventilation systems, and
 - A well-researched understanding of self-mitigation protocols.

Mask Requirements Moving Forward

- **Beginning March 21**, face masks will no longer be required in most settings, including K–12 schools and childcare facilities.
- Masks will still be required in school buses, per federal law. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is set to revisit the requirement mid-March.
- Until March 21, face masks will continue to be required for all students, staff, and visitors in all school buildings.
- Public health modeling indicates that cases and hospitalizations from COVID-19 will continue decreasing over the coming weeks, and by mid-March, they are expected to drop to rates similar to last summer.
- The decision to remove the statewide mask requirement was based on the best science and research available, as well as our experience and preparation to continue combatting this virus.
- A local school district could decide to implement a mask mandate for their students and staff on their own, though we would strongly encourage them to make such a decision in partnership with their local health jurisdiction. Locally elected school board members, who set policies for their districts, are not health experts and should not be making health decisions on their own.

Respecting Others' Choices

- Barring a local requirement, students and staff will have the choice to wear a mask at school, with the expectation that others' choices will be respected.
- One should not make assumptions regarding someone's beliefs or health status, nor should they comment on them.
- District will not tolerate bullying of any kind.
- Educators will discuss the change with students in a developmentally appropriate manner, including how to respect others' personal choice.

Health and Safety Protocol Updates

- DOH is preparing updated guidance for K–12 schools, and they intend to release the guidance by the week of March 7. Guidance around distancing, ventilation, and sanitation will change from requirements to recommendations effective March 21.
- Schools will be required to continue reporting COVID-19 cases and outbreaks, as with any other communicable disease.
- Schools must also continue to provide access to testing for staff and students who have been exposed or are showing symptoms consistent with COVID-19.
- Students or staff members who test positive for COVID-19 must remain at home and follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Department of Health isolation protocols.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why was this change made?

Data show rates of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are declining rapidly in our state, and public health models show that, by mid-March, cases and hospitalizations are predicted to drop to levels we haven't seen since last summer. Masks impact the learning environment, and with widespread access to vaccinations, our expansive school COVID-19 testing program, and rapidly declining cases and hospitalizations, it was time to rebalance the benefits and challenges of universal masking in schools.

Will schools continue testing students and staff who show symptoms of COVID-19?

Yes. This announcement has no impact on the COVID-19 testing program in our schools.

Does it make a difference if someone is vaccinated or not?

No. The statewide indoor mask requirements will be lifted for all students and staff on March 21, regardless of vaccination status. Masks may still be required for those who recently tested positive for COVID-19, were identified as a close contact for someone with COVID-19, or for other reasons identified by the Department of Health or a local health officer.

Will the vaccination requirement for school employees change?

The Governor has not announced any intention of changing the COVID-19 vaccination requirement for school employees.

What about unvaccinated employees who received a medical or religious accommodation, and their accommodation requires a mask?

Barring updated guidance from the Department of Labor & Industries or the Department of Health, employees with accommodations should work with their Human Resources department on next steps.

Can a school district require masks for their students and staff, even if the state isn't?

Yes, school districts may require masking for teachers and students. However, OSPI strongly recommends that districts considering this requirement work in partnership with their local health jurisdiction to determine whether it is necessary. School district officials are not health experts.

What responsibilities does a school district have if there are confirmed cases of COVID-19 in a school?

School districts are required by state law to report cases and outbreaks to their local health officer (this requirement was in law long before COVID-19).

What if I want my student to continue wearing a mask?

Barring a local requirement for masks, students and staff will continue to have the option to wear masks at school, with the expectation that those decisions will be respected. Those decisions should not be used to make assumptions about their personal beliefs or their health status and should not be commented on. Districts should not tolerate bullying of any kind of students who continue wearing masks.

What is being done to protect students and staff who are at greater risk of COVID-19?

Public health experts continue to recommend full vaccination and masking for those who are at greater risk for serious COVID-related health issues. The most important mitigation strategy is to continue increasing the number of students and school employees who are fully vaccinated.

Why will masks still be required on school buses?

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently requires all individuals on public transportation, including school buses, wear masks. Neither the state nor local school districts are able to change this requirement.

What would cause a local health officer to start requiring masks in schools again?

Local health officers have always had the authority in state law to require health and safety mitigation measures in schools when the situation warrants it, and that will not change. Health officers will continue to monitor community case counts and hospitalizations, and they may add new mitigation measures for schools if they deem it necessary.

What happens if a school district stops requiring masks before March 21?

School districts are required to follow the law, and the law currently requires masks in schools. If school districts willfully violate state law, they face legal and financial risks.