

*Please find below questions related to the recent implementation of a masking mandate at West Burlington Independent Schools. Also found at the end of the document is the protocol the district will use to determine when to consider a transition to or from masking expectations. Should you have further questions please feel free to reach out to me.*

*Lisa Beames  
Superintendent*

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: MASKING MANDATE**

### **WHY DID THE BOARD CONSIDER A MASKING MANDATE?**

The board considered a masking mandate because the filing of the temporary injunction related to the masking ban passed by the Iowa legislature earlier this spring temporarily changed the locus of decision-making from the state to the local board. While which decision may have been “right” is disagreed on, what is important is your Board assumed the responsibility to make a decision at the board table as the board.

### **THE TEMPORARY INJUNCTION ENDS ON MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 27<sup>TH</sup>. WHY ALL OF THIS IF IT MAY REVERT BACK TO THE BAN?**

The decision to reimplement a mask mandate was not a political one. The district and the county have both been experiencing high levels of illness. The board reviewed district data and was also aware of the Des Moines County positivity rates and communications from public health and the local hospital. District data included the number of students testing Covid positive, the number of students who are close contacts and symptomatic the number of students who the nurse has sent home and the number of students parents have kept home sick. As well the board was aware that at that time, we had 3 classrooms at the elementary who had more than 10% of the students testing positive with additional student in them ill.

Last year the elementary had had 1 case of Covid with 15 cases total for the year. At the time of the meeting, they had 6 students currently out and had had a total of 17 students total. Last year the Jr./Sr. High School had 3 students out due to Covid as of the date and had a total of 57 students out throughout the course of the year. AS of the time of the meeting, they had 8 out that day and had had a total of 16 out since the start of the year. Concerns about the accuracy of that count were also noted due to the changes made through legislation and to the Governor’s Emergency Proclamation.

At the time of the meeting there was concern about reaching the 10% threshold for reporting to the state at which time it is to be reported to local public health. Neither of the buildings had met that threshold at that time. The elementary surpassed 10% illness rate on Thursday and Friday of last week and the Jr./ Sr. High School surpassed it on Monday as well as yesterday.

The board also knew that the transition to considering COVID as a childhood disease as laid out through changes in the Governor’s Emergency Proclamation had shut down our ability to

require testing and/or to remain out of school for 10 days. Now it could/can only be recommended. We could require quarantining for close contacts. Now it could/can only be highly recommended. It also removed the protocol that if a child demonstrated multiple symptoms regardless of temperature, they could be sent home until they met the conditions of the protocol. Now, if a child demonstrates multiple symptoms of illness, unless they reach the temperature threshold, we cannot require them to go home; we could/can only highly recommend it. We cannot contact trace and public health cannot tell us who is a close contact. These tools were critical to our ability to manage students staying in school last year. This year currently none of them are in our toolbox.

We had been seeing more and more that people, for many reasons, choose to send their students to school regardless. While we can understand and appreciate their decisions, it drastically limits the district's ability to manage illness rates. This year at that time there had been or was

Regardless of what the board determined they recognized it was going to be controversial and regardless of the data, it would be questioned.

This political battle will progress over the course of this school year or the end of the pandemic declaration, whichever happens first. The Board's responsibility and too, ability to entertain the need to enter a mask mandate may shift with each step of the progress as well.

#### **WHAT HAPPENS IF THE INJUNCTION STANDS?**

The district maintains the masking mandate until the board determines based on the Identified metrics that masks will no longer be required.

#### **WHAT HAPPENS IF THE INJUNCTION IS LIFTED?**

The district adheres to the state law which would allow people to choose to wear a mask.

#### **WHY IS THE LEVEL OF ILLNESS SO CONCERNING TO THE SCHOOL AND THE BOARD?**

This is concerning, of course, because if kids are sick, they miss out on learning. While kids can learn in many places and under many formats, for many students and families they find the greatest success learning best in a school setting and as a public school we have the obligation to educate all students. As we work our way through this pandemic, we are also charged with closing the gaps brought on by the Spring of 20 and last school year. To this end, the state has numerous accountability factors for districts related to attendance and student achievement. If a student or numerous students are not in school both are jeopardized.

Personally, and collectively part of it is also the "what if" one of them dies. While nothing can compare to walking through the death of your child, that a student dies under your watch can be devastating to other students, the school and the school community.

There is concern about maintaining our responsibilities to help keep the health care system stable in order to treat not only Covid illness, but other illnesses, unforeseen emergencies as well as to be able to support the general and specialized health needs of the community.

Finally, due to legislation passed last year, there is not the ability of the district to count hours for virtual learning or if we shut down due to illness rates. If a school closes, those hours would very likely need to be made up.. Know too, that due to changes in the Governor's Emergency Proclamations it is the Board that will have to make that decision to close school at this time. If illness isn't kept in check now, that becomes a yet more challenges before us.

#### **WHAT IS THE CURRENT MASKING MANDATE:**

Throughout the Pandemic the Board and District have worked to stay aligned to the CDC or Iowa Department of Public Health guidance. The expectations of this mandate are aligned with current CDC expectations.

The current masking expectations include the following three major considerations:

Masks are to be:

- Worn when inside,
- Including in common areas (Commons, Hallways, Cafeterias)
- When 3 feet social distancing cannot be maintained.

At the elementary level, the majority of our classrooms accommodate non-masking when students are seated. The exceptions are primarily in our Specials classrooms/programs such as art and music and Title I.

At the secondary level approximately 80% of our classroom accommodate non-masking when seats are distanced. As students move between rooms more frequently, they are likely not to be masked for consecutive class periods throughout their day.

Outside the classrooms that cannot accommodate the 3-foot distancing, the time in the classroom that students most often are expected to mask are those when they are involved with other students in close group work or centers. Research demonstrates that such active activities provide some of the highest degree of learning for students. They are critical to closing learning gaps and promoting high achievement.

Generally, such activities last between five (5) and thirty (30) minutes. The length at one time and the amount of total time such activities occur throughout a specific child's day is dependent on age, scheduling and the specific design of the instruction they are engaged in.

While the length of passing times is often minimal, the number of students transitioning and proximity of student to other students is inconsistent. Students are expected to mask when passing between classrooms and when coming and leaving the school building.

## **WHY ARE THE MASKING EXPECTATIONS NOT THE SAME FOR SPORTING ACTIVITIES AS THEY ARE FOR THE SCHOOL DAY?**

Public schools are established and operate under the concept of FAPE. As all children have the right to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) steps to ensure that everyone has a reasonable opportunity to benefit from FAPE are implemented. That is why this current time is so tricky and messy and ultimately the courts will determine whose needs are greater than others to best ensure that those expectations are met.

Activities such as the athletics and other co-curricular programs while regulated to ensure equitable access under Title IX, are the choice of students and parents to participate in and to attend. They are not required like that of the instructional day which has greater regulation. Such activities have treated differently throughout much of COVID through guidance from the Department of Education, the respective sponsoring organization such as IHSAA, IHSMAA, and IGHSAA and, at times, through coordination across the conference.

## **WHAT WILL THE EXPECTATIONS FOR HOMECOMING BE?**

As it relates to the application of a masking mandate, a third area of consideration is school-sponsored events such as Homecoming and its activities. These events are only for our student body and potentially their guests. Components of school sponsored events may include the public. Last year we established that school-sponsored events as these would be expected to follow those mitigation strategies of the school district at that time. If a masking mandate is expected during the school day, it will be expected for student to participate and for family and guest to observe students' participation in during those events.

Mr. Snodgrass will be communicating expectations related to Homecoming yet this week.

## **WHAT ARE MY OPTIONS IF MY CHILD CANNOT WEAR A MASK OR AS PARENTS WE DO NOT SUPPORT THE EXPECTATIONS?**

If your child is served by an IEP and you have concerns related to the impact of the ability to meet the IEP while masked, please contact the building administrator.

If your child has a medical or religious reason that makes them unable to wear a mask you may complete the Request for Exemption form that is available in the district office or online as [www.wbisd.com](http://www.wbisd.com). Once received those will be reviewed and other options or accommodations will be considered. Examples of potential accommodations may include increased mask breaks, the use of a shield, completion of work independently offering, or moving to online programming.

As online programming may be an accommodation for some, please note that the district will consider on a case-by-case basis attendance at the VIBE Program through Burlington Schools. If that is considered an appropriate accommodation considering the current situation, students

choosing to attend and being accepted would be required to remain in that program until the end of a Trimester. If a student, then transitioned back to West Burlington for a face-to-face learning setting at the end of a Trimester he/she would most often not be allowed to return to that program as consideration of an accommodation made related to a masking mandate.

If law requires that student under the age 16 and under are mandatory attenders of school. If an accommodation offered by the district remains unviable, the family will need to consider other educational options for their student. These may include moving to competent private instruction, returning to your resident district or another district if you are open enrolled or if a resident student requesting open enrollment to another district.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience should you want to pursue consideration of these options.

Should the injunction be voided, families having concerns about their child's well-being would also have the option to seek resolution in the manners presented above.

#### **WHAT OTHER MITIGATION STRATEGIES BESIDES MASKING HAVE BEEN TAKEN?**

The district has maintained many of the cleaning and hygiene mitigation strategies of last year, reimplemented some as illness levels increased. As elementary classrooms have reached 10% or greater of students testing positive to COVID-19, those classrooms moved to a greater level of mitigation including lunches in the classroom, greater distancing and minimal if any group work or centers. A similar set of strategies would be implemented 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade. In reporting our 10% absences to the Department of Public Health mitigation strategies have been discussed. We had started the year with many of their suggestions or had implemented as illness was seen to be increasing.

# Protocol to Transition To or From Masking

## PRIMARY CONSIDERATIONS And DATA POINTS

### DISTRICT

- How many of the last 5, 10, and 15 school days has a Covid Positive rate of **2%** or greater as a district and by building been experienced?
- How many days of the last 5, 10 and 15 school days have been at or below a **7%** combined illness rate as a district and by building?

*(Infinite Campus>Attendance)*

### COUNTY

- Is the county positivity rate **at or below 11%** as of the last report?
- Does the county positivity rate show a **declining** or **increasing** trend over the past 3 and 6 reporting cycles?
- Does the county positivity rate show a **declining** or **increasing** trend of the percentage of children 0-18 over the past 3 and 6 reporting cycles?

*(State COVID-19 Tracker)*

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION TO BE AVAILABLE FOR BOARD DISCUSSION

### DISTRICT

- What is the absence rate of staff (illness and other)?
- What is the degree of internal staff coverage or non-coverage for staff absences due to substitutes not being available?

*(Absence and Pay Documents)*

### COUNTY

- Are the trends, **increasing** or **declining** for appointments, in admissions of pediatric patients and in services available locally and at other care centers?
- What is the projected cycle of the current Covid-19 variants and the expected timing in Des Moines County? ( i.e. 1, 3, or 5 weeks before significant **decline** or **increase**)
- What is the level of and projected cycle of non-Covid illnesses being seen in pediatric patients. (i.e. 1, 3, or 5 weeks before significant **decline** or **increase**)

*(Conversations with local public health and medical personnel)*

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **How will the district apply the transition protocol?**

Going forward, the Board will consider the transition of students to masking by building levels, PK-5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>.

### **How often will the district transition between masking and not masking?**

With the expectation to monitor trends over time, the district will implement a time of masking or non-masking for a minimum length of 15 school days.

### **How will the district and public receive information about progress toward the metrics?**

The district will provide the status of the District's Primary Consideration data points as compared to the metrics to the Board weekly and more often when metric targets are neared. A means of sharing this with the public is being developed and will be implemented.

### **When will the board consider a transition to or from masking?**

The Board will be asked to consider a transition as at least two of the 3 of the Primary Consideration data points near the identified metric or when the board, through processes identified in policy and code determines to have it placed on the agenda of a regular or special board meeting.