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## School masking now up to San Mateo County school districts

Education administrators preparing to weigh benefits of setting individual mask policies

Sierra Lopez Daily Journal staff

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As COVID-19 cases have continued to drop across the state, California leadership has set a date for when classroom masking will no longer be mandated, leaving it up to San Mateo County education officials to decide what may be best for their school

communities.

Starting March 12, students and school staff will no longer be required by the state to wear a face covering regardless of vaccination status, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced on Monday, Feb. 28, in a joint statement with Oregon Gov. Kate Brown and Washington Gov. Jay Inslee who also announced policy changes in their states.

The changes come as COVID-19 cases caused by the more contagious omicron variant continue a downward trend. And school communities have anticipated an announcement from the state regarding face coverings since a press conference by California Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Mark Ghaly Feb. 14.

But today's announcement leaves school officials with nine working days to prepare their approach, a window of time Dr. Kevin Skelly, San Mateo Union High School District superintendent, said is shorter than anticipated.

"I wish the state had given us more time," Skelly said. "We knew this was coming but I thought we would have at least more time to settle into this topic but it is what it is."

District officials will now have to weigh input from a number of stakeholders including teachers' unions, students and their parents before deciding whether to follow the state's lead or to continue requiring masks.

Being the decision-maker in the masking debate is a new role for districts that have been under strong state guidance over the past two years and have had the mandate to point to when calls to end masking grew louder.

The position is a difficult one to be in for an individual district, Skelly said, noting SMUHSD officials have concerns for the immunocompromised and also for students or faculty facing backlash for choosing whether or not to mask.

While in agreement with Skelly around the benefits of having “cover” from the state, John Baker, president of the South San Francisco Unified School District Board of Trustees, said local control is also a good thing.

“Whichever side of the debate you’re on, having the authority for a local district to decide is beneficial. This is kind of what we get paid the small bucks for,” Baker said.

Given the immense pressure to lift masking mandates in schools in different areas across the state, Baker said he was also not surprised by the short time frame passed down by the state and said it was not a “tremendous inconvenience.” Governing boards for both districts are slated to discuss the issue on Thursday, March 10.

Baker shed doubt that the mask would be lifted right away at SSFUSD’s 15 campus. District officials will need to communicate any policy changes with campus leadership who will also have to develop protocol, he said.

“We will be listening to everybody,” Baker said. “We’re going to have to see how the debate goes.”

Recognizing the differing takes on school mask mandates and that changes to the state policy would result in mixed reactions, California Teachers Association President E. Toby Boyd put out a statement encouraging districts to act cautiously while also working to develop solutions that take into consideration the perspectives of all students, families and educators.

While sharing in the state’s optimism for dropping COVID-19 rates, Boyd similarly stressed the importance of other mitigation measures like robust testing programs, vaccinations and strong ventilation systems in safely reopening campuses for in-person instruction and keeping them open amid multiple COVID-19 surges.

“Change is never easy, and today’s announcement is bound to disrupt and destabilize some school communities. As we transition to the next phase of living with COVID-19, we must go forward with respect, understanding, and care for each other,” the statement read.

San Mateo-Foster City School District officials, in anticipation of the announcement, decided to survey its district community, Superintendent Diego Ochoa said in an emailed statement. More than 2,000 responses have been gathered, which largely favored continuing mitigation strategies, Ochoa said, noting engagement events will continue through the week.

The district is one of the largest in the county with 11,000 students across 21 campuses but just more than 1,000 COVID-19 cases among students and staff have been reported to the district since the start of the spring semester when omicron cases were at their highest.

“Parent engagement is key for the district to ensure the decision made serves our whole community,” Ochoa said.

For Sequoia Union High School District, collaboration will be key, Superintendent Dr. Darnise Williams said in an email statement. The district of about 10,000 students was the hardest hit during the omicron surge with nearly 2,000 students and staff members testing positive this semester, according to the district’s COVID-19 dashboard.

Since the start of the pandemic, Williams said she has worked to foster a strong partnership between district administrators and the Board of Trustees in decision-making and she intends to continue that approach while following County Health.

“As we move forward into a new phase of the pandemic, we will continue that decision-making approach while also considering the guidance provided by the San Mateo County Health Department,” Williams said. “We remain cautiously optimistic about the governor’s latest directive but are also quite aware of the fact that we have been here before.”

*Visit the County Health website at [smchealth.org/coronavirus](https://smchealth.org/coronavirus) for more information on mandates, COVID-19 health trends and testing and vaccine clinics.*

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### More Information

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### MORE INFORMATION



California, Oregon, Washington to drop school mask mandates

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Reporter

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