

February 16, 2022

Dear Simsbury Staff and Parents/Guardians:

Since my last communication about the mask mandate, local school districts have now received additional assurances that the Department of Public Health (DPH) and the State Department of Education (SDE) are aligned with the Governor in allowing the mask mandate to expire. Yesterday my central office team participated in an important meeting with other area superintendents and the staff of the Farmington Valley Health District (FVHD).

Based on the information we are receiving from these public health officials, the Simsbury Public Schools will have a mask-optional policy for all students and staff beginning on Monday, February 28th.

Factors supporting a mask-optional approach for the Simsbury Public Schools include the following:

- The experts we have consulted with and relied upon throughout the COVID-19 pandemic – FVHD, DPH, and SDE – are unified in supporting this approach at this time.
- Cases have dropped significantly since late December/early January – not only across the state, but also within our school system.
- Simsbury's vaccination rates are very high:
 - 95% of the adult population (18+) is fully vaccinated, with 100% of the most vulnerable age group (65+) fully vaccinated
 - 81.3% of 12-17 year-olds are fully vaccinated, and 86.5% have initiated the process
 - 56.4% of 5-11 year-olds are fully vaccinated, and 63.0% have initiated the process
- The district still has several thousand self-test kits at-the-ready to help screen individuals who are experiencing symptoms or who have experienced an exposure. School nurses are ready to deploy these testing kits to staff or families at any time.
- We will continue to employ many of the other mitigation strategies we have had in place since returning to school, and we will re-institute the process of contact tracing cases – *not for purposes of exclusions and quarantines* - but rather to inform students/families and staff who are close contacts to a positive case, so that they can make their own decision about self-testing in the days after an exposure.

- For those who still need or will choose to wear masks, we have a stockpile of N95 masks available for staff or high school students (unfortunately, they are not sized for smaller children).
- **Please know that the rules for wearing masks on school transportation are still in effect, per federal regulations.** We ask for the cooperation of all students who continue to ride our buses, and we will keep you informed about any changes to this exception.
- If conditions change in the weeks and months ahead, the SDE, in consultation with public health officials, would still have the authority to re-issue mask mandates in school.
- This decision is in alignment with our reopening plan from last summer, in which we stated our intention for a mask-optional policy in Simsbury when conditions warranted.

We recognize that this decision will be met with very different reactions – from celebration to sincere anxiety. Moving forward, we implore all stakeholders to respect those differences in opinion. Please have a family conversation about respecting the differences that exist on this issue and respect the choice of others without public judgment. As Superintendent, I have been proud of the way our community has handled the evolving controversies as a result of the pandemic. At this critical moment, that positive spirit in our community must continue.

Our Board of Education holds its next meeting on Wednesday, February 23rd at Central School. Please know that the Board does not need to take formal action in order to implement the mask-optional approach. The Board is supportive of this direction and has appreciated receiving many communications from stakeholders over the last several weeks.

It has been two years since I first wrote to all of you about COVID-19. While this will not be the last time, I certainly recognize that we have reached a critical threshold in the return to normalcy within our schools. The health and safety of students and staff will, of course, remain a top priority for our district as we monitor the impact of this important change. As always, thank you for your continued support and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Matt Curtis
Superintendent of Schools