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CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS ANNOUNCES MOVE TO MASK-OPTIONAL MODEL BEGINNING MARCH 14

District will continue to encourage use of masks for students and staff

CHICAGO - Chicago Public Schools (CPS) will move to a mask-optional model for staff and all students, pre-k through grade 12, beginning Monday, March 14. While CPS will continue to encourage the use of masks, the shift will give families and employees a choice about whether or not to wear a mask at school, outside on school property, and on school buses.

“CPS was one of the first to require universal masking in schools, and we would not be moving to a mask-optional model unless the data and our public health experts indicated that it is safe for our school communities,” said CPS CEO Pedro Martinez. “We will support our staff and students as we enter this new phase in the pandemic and continue to move forward together.”

The number of COVID-19 cases in schools and throughout the city of Chicago has declined sharply over the past several weeks, while at the same time, vaccination rates among CPS students and staff are continuing to rise, and voluntary testing has dramatically increased in schools. Vaccination rates to date:

- CPS COVID-19 vaccination rates are now near the national average for 12-17 year-old students (64 percent of CPS students age 12-17 have had at least a first dose, compared to 68 percent nationally).
- Rates are well above the national average for 5-11 year-old students (47 percent of CPS students age 5-11 have had at least a first dose, compared to 33 percent nationally).
- Overall, 56 percent of age-eligible CPS students have received at least one dose, and nearly half (49 percent) are fully vaccinated.
- More than 91 percent of all CPS staff members are fully vaccinated.

Chicago is at low risk for COVID-19 by every metric, including the historic and current metrics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The city’s case counts and positivity are the lowest they have been since July 2021 and continue to fall. Chicago is now averaging just 191 cases of COVID-19



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per day, among an average of more than 27,000 daily tests performed, giving a positivity rate of just 0.8%. CPS' screening test positivity rate is dramatically lower than the city's, at 0.14 percent.

The move to mask optional comes two years after the pandemic forced CPS and schools across the state to shut down. Since that time, CPS has relied on the guidance of local, state, and federal public health experts who are now aligned in their opinion that the risk of contracting COVID-19 in schools is very low. Most school districts across the country have already transitioned to a mask-optional model. The City of Chicago removed the mask requirements for certain public spaces on February 28 to align with the State of Illinois, and the CDC recently relaxed mask guidance for communities where hospitals aren't under high strain. Chicago is currently in low risk per the new [CDC guidance](#).

CPS will continue to encourage the practice of wearing masks in schools, especially in schools with lower vaccination rates and among those students and staff who feel most comfortable with a face covering. The District will also support those members of its school communities who choose not to wear a mask, and will provide tools that teachers and parents can use to guide conversations with students about the importance of honoring and respecting everyone's personal choice.

"The adults in our school communities will set the tone during this transition," said Chief Education Officer Bogdana Chkoumbova. "I am confident that we will continue to support and respect one another through this next phase of the pandemic. Family and community situations may change and dictate if a student or staff member wears a mask and we all need to ensure that everyone feels welcome to continue the practice that makes them feel safest and most comfortable."

The District will continue many of its COVID-19 safety mitigation measures including voluntary on-site testing, contact tracing, and proper hand hygiene. Over the past two years, CPS has worked to improve and better monitor indoor air quality with a \$15 million investment in HEPA air filters and a \$141 million investment to improve mechanical system upgrades. The air quality of every classroom, in every building, based on a third party evaluation, is available on the District [website](#). Students are not in rooms that have not passed the air quality assessments.

CPS will share more information with families and staff before Monday, March 14 around how this change will impact the District's various health and safety protocols.

"The District has remained responsive to change throughout the pandemic and we must continue to remain nimble and pivot if the health data changes," said CEO Martinez. "Our staff and families must be confident that we will act quickly and implement safety procedures as needed."

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