



Shrewsbury Public Schools

Joseph M. Sawyer, Ed.D.
Superintendent

March 2, 2022

To: School Committee

From: Joe Sawyer

Re: Recommendation to end mask mandate as part of COVID-19 mitigation protocols

Our school district has been operating under five separate masking mandates over the course of this school year. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) has [lifted its mask mandate for public schools](#) effective February 28, and the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association [lifted its mandate for athletic events](#) that same day. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lifted [its mask mandate for school bus and van transportation](#) effective February 25. The [Shrewsbury Board of Health's \(BOH\) mask mandate](#) for inside all public and private schools in Shrewsbury and on any school transportation within Shrewsbury remains in effect; the BOH is meeting this coming Friday, March 4, to consider action to rescind this mandate.

Additionally, [the CDC has updated its guidance regarding masking in schools](#), recommending that it be optional unless a school is in an area deemed at "high risk" for serious illness or strained healthcare resources.

At your last meeting, the School Committee conveyed its preference to wait until after the February school vacation to take any action regarding [your indoor mask mandate](#) within Shrewsbury Public Schools facilities, given that after previous school vacations the case numbers have increased. I am pleased to report that during the week of February 19-25, encompassing most of the vacation week itself, there were only five (5) cases of COVID-19 reported among students and staff, and that so far this week only seven (7) cases have been reported, despite the fact that the families and staff participating in our rapid surveillance testing program were asked to take their home tests on Sunday, February 27. This is a precipitous drop in cases over the past month as the Omicron variant surge has dissipated.

This very low case rate, combined with other improved state and local metrics (such as [wastewater measures](#), as well as [cases, hospitalization, death, and positivity rates](#)) and a [relatively high level of vaccination](#) within our community, signal that optional masking is highly unlikely to create a significant risk of COVID-19 transmission within our schools.

Given this data, I recommend that the School Committee vote to rescind its mask mandate so that wearing masks is optional within any Shrewsbury Public Schools facility or indoor setting, effective immediately.

If the School Committee votes as such, the Shrewsbury BOH masking requirement will be the only mandate that remains in effect, until such time as it takes action.

However, it is important to note that, based upon certain continued mandated practices, individuals will need to continue to wear masks in the following situations:

- 1) Inside nurses' offices in schools (per CDC mandate for healthcare settings that has not been modified at this time)
- 2) When an individual who has tested positive for COVID-19 returns to school after five (5) days of isolation (per CDC and Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MA DPH) requirements for days six (6) through ten (10) of the period after infection. Note: We believe that many individuals will continue to mask when it is optional, which will avoid the issue of someone returning from a COVID-19 infection standing out due to required masking. MA DPH also advises close contacts to mask for ten (10) days, although this is something the school district no longer monitors per updated guidance. (MA DPH guidance can be found [here](#))
- 3) If students are competing at or visiting other school districts or locations where masking is mandatory, where those local requirements must be followed (athletics, academic competitions, clubs, etc.)

If and when masking becomes optional for SPS students, staff, and visitors, it will be important for district and school leaders to convey that all members of the school community will be expected to respect the choices made by each individual regarding whether to wear a mask at school, as no one should be made to feel uncomfortable for following their preference (or, in the case of students, their parents' expectations) regarding masking.

I also recommend that the School Committee vote to require the Superintendent of Schools to adhere to the following guidelines regarding the monitoring of conditions that could affect the health and safety of the school community in order to consider any potential future implementation of a mask requirement:

- 1) The Superintendent of Schools will monitor ongoing communications from the state and local departments of public health, the CDC, and DESE regarding any threats to the health and safety of the school community, whether from COVID-19 or any other contagious disease.
- 2) The Superintendent of Schools will monitor student attendance on a weekly basis. If student attendance drops below an average of 92% for the district or for a school over a period of 10 school days, the Superintendent will consult with the School District Physician, the Director of Nursing, and medical and public health personnel from the Worcester Department of Public Health associated with the Central Massachusetts Regional Public Health Alliance regarding potential causes of increased student illness. Such consultation will also occur prior to a significant change in attendance if other information warrants it.

- 3) If after a review of data and potential causes of illness of students or staff, and/or if medical and public health experts communicate concerns regarding a contagious illness that could be transmitted in the school setting, and/or if there are other unforeseen circumstances that warrant concern, the Superintendent may implement a temporary masking requirement until the School Committee can convene and consider whether to vote to institute a policy requiring masking.
- 4) If the Superintendent institutes a temporary masking requirement, he or she will consult further with the aforementioned medical and public health officials regarding a recommendation to the School Committee for a potential masking policy based on the circumstances, and he or she will notify the Board of Health and the Town Manager regarding the situation.