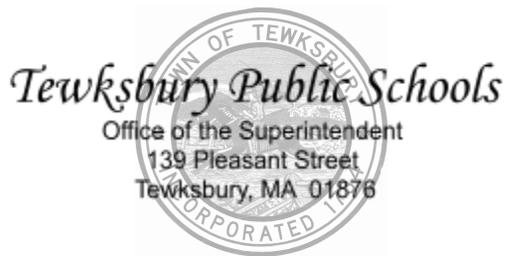


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Celebrating Excellence



August 26, 2021

Dear TPS Community,

As an update to the Massachusetts State level and Tewksbury Public Schools response to the pandemic, along with the opening of schools, we want to make sure all parents and students are prepared for a safe and positive return to school on September 1st. Late yesterday Massachusetts DESE Commissioner Riley issued a statewide mask mandate for which I have highlighted below:

- Effective immediately, public school students (age 5 and above) and staff in all grades are required to wear masks indoors in schools, except as noted below. Masks are not required when outdoors. All visitors are also expected to wear a mask in school buildings.
- The mask requirement will be in place until at least October 1, 2021. The Commissioner will revisit the requirement in the near future to revise it as warranted by public health data.
- By federal public health order, all students and staff are required to wear a mask on school buses.
- After October 1, 2021, if a school demonstrates a vaccination rate of 80% or more of students and staff in the school, then vaccinated individuals in that school would no longer be subject to the DESE mask requirement. DESE will provide additional information to districts in the coming weeks in preparation for the October 1 date, including how to demonstrate the 80% vaccination rate threshold. (full DESE Mask Requirement is attached)

Last Wednesday, our own School Committee voted 4-1 requiring masks at all grade levels indoors at our schools. This new MA State mandate supersedes the local School Committee determination and places the responsibility for the decision regarding masks at the appropriate State level. According to the statewide Mask Requirement; "Students and staff who cannot wear a mask for medical reasons, and students who cannot wear a mask for behavioral reasons, are exempted from the requirement. Face shields may be an option for students with medical or behavioral needs who are unable to wear masks or face coverings. Transparent masks may be the best option for both teachers and students in classes for deaf and hard of hearing students." Requests for exemptions will be considered based on the existence of a documented medical endangerment presented by masking (possible 504 Plan or medical Plan process required), subject to further review by the School Medical staff, or documented behavior factors (possible special education team meeting or referral to special education) which interfere with a student's ability to comply. I ask that any parent who has a concern in this area contact their building principal and begin that process, but also please understand that this process is not immediate and likely will not be determined for a student by September 1st.

TPS District Strategy

The Tewksbury Public Schools community believes that our educational program will encompass a 21st century teaching and learning approach that promotes consistent growth among our students and staff to achieve academic, social, and emotional success for all students.

We will certainly support any student who is willing to comply with the statewide mask requirement but having difficulty. These instances will be treated as learning opportunities and support will be provided.

Although we all saw positive signs regarding the impact of the pandemic on schools over the spring and early summer, it has clearly resurfaced as an ongoing issue we will all need to respond to. When it comes to mandating masks on students, it certainly creates emotions and divisions among many people. As Superintendent, I am pleading with all parents to please refrain from utilizing our schools as a platform to play-out these emotions and divisions. Simply put, the schools are for learning in a safe environment, not a place where students and staff members should be interjected into this debate. This is no more evident in the fact that this is now a State issue, not a local issue.

Last year we had very few, if any, issues with the mask mandate and we hope this continues for this school year. Our staff is always willing to assist a student or parent who is having difficulty and we will continue to implement appropriate mask breaks, and take advantage of outdoor spaces where masks are not required. However, to be clear, students who outright refuse to wear a mask with the intent of non-compliance specific to the State mandate, and do not qualify for an exemption, are not in a condition to attend school. Although I have heard of a small group of parents who intend to challenge this by purposely sending their child to school without a mask, it is my hope that we can come together to support the safe learning of all students and not let this happen. Students who do not comply with this requirement will meet with the building Principal and their parents to discuss whether the student is in a condition to attend school in a manner that is safe for the student and others in the building, and may be subject to progressive discipline for deliberate non-compliance. It is my hope, and I ask all parents to support, that our schools not become the place where these issues are played-out. We will continue to work with the Tewksbury Police Department to provide a defined police presence to ensure all students and staff are safe during our return to school.

Sincerely,

Chris

Christopher J. Malone
Superintendent of Schools

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[Implementation of DESE Mask Requirement: August 25, 2021](#)

TPS District Strategy

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