

Transitioning from Pandemic to Endemic: Changes to Statewide School Mask Requirements

March 8, 2022

Dear Grand Coulee Dam Students, Parents, and Community Members,

I am writing to share important information about the mask requirements in our schools.



On February 17, 2022, Governor Jay Inslee announced that the statewide indoor mask requirement for Washington State, including in our K–12 schools, is scheduled to end on March 12, 2022. Once the statewide requirement is lifted, masks will be encouraged in our school buildings, but not required.

Until March 12th, masks will continue to be required for all students, staff, and visitors in all Grand Coulee Dam School District buildings. The School District and our Board of Directors do not have local control over this matter. We are legally required to follow the Governor's directive, which currently requires masks in school buildings.

Public health modeling indicates that cases and hospitalizations from COVID-19 will continue decreasing over the coming weeks, dropping to rates similar to last summer. The decision to remove the statewide mask requirement is reported to be based on the best science and research available, as well as our diligent efforts to continue combatting this virus.

Once the statewide mask requirement lifts, without a new requirement from our local health department, masks will become optional in our school buildings. Students will have the choice to wear a mask at school, with the expectation that others' choices will be respected. Parents wishing for their student to continue to wear their mask when inside the school should inform their student's teacher of their request. One should not make assumptions regarding someone's beliefs or health status, nor should they comment on them. Our district will not tolerate bullying of any kind for those who choose to continue wearing masks.

For young children, please let teachers know your wishes and they will do their best to reinforce them. Our educators will discuss the change with students in a developmentally appropriate manner, including how to respect others' personal choice. If your child(ren) expresses any anxiety, please feel free to reach out to our school counselors or psychologists for support.

We thank you for your continued flexibility as we navigate this transition from pandemic to endemic together. We know you likely have many questions about this announcement, and we are anticipating receiving additional information from public health officials in the coming weeks. We will continue communicating with you as we learn about changes to the guidance for our district.

Below is a list of “Frequently Ask Questions.”

Sincerely,
Paul Turner
Superintendent, Grand Coulee Dam School District

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why was this change made?

A: Data show rates of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are declining rapidly in our state, and public health models show that, by mid-March, cases and hospitalizations are predicted to drop to levels we haven’t seen since last summer. Masks impact the learning environment, and with widespread access to vaccinations, our expansive school COVID-19 testing program, and rapidly declining cases and hospitalizations, it was time to rebalance the benefits and challenges of universal masking in schools.

Q: Will schools continue testing students and staff who show symptoms of COVID-19?

A: Yes. This announcement has no impact on the COVID-19 testing program in our schools.

Q: Does it make a difference if someone is vaccinated or not?

A: No. The statewide indoor mask requirements will be lifted for all students and staff on March 21, regardless of vaccination status. Masks may still be required for those who recently tested positive for COVID-19, were identified as a close contact for someone with COVID-19, or for other reasons identified by the Department of Health or a local health officer.

Q: Will the vaccination requirement for school employees change?

A: The Governor has not announced any intention of changing the COVID-19 vaccination requirement for school employees.

Q: What about unvaccinated employees who received a medical or religious accommodation, and their accommodation requires a mask?

A: Barring updated guidance from the Department of Labor & Industries or the Department of Health, employees with accommodations should work with their Human Resources department on next steps.

Q: Can a school district require masks for their students and staff, even if the state isn’t?

A: Yes, school districts may require masking for teachers and students. However, OSPI strongly recommends that districts considering this requirement work in partnership with their local health jurisdiction to determine whether it is necessary. School district officials are not health experts.

Q: What responsibilities does a school district have if there are confirmed cases of COVID-19 in a school?

A: School districts are required by state law to report cases and outbreaks to their local health officer (this requirement was in law long before COVID-19).

Q: What if I want my student to continue wearing a mask?

A: Barring a local requirement for masks, students and staff will continue to have the option to wear masks at school, with the expectation that those decisions will be respected. Those decisions should not be used to make assumptions about their personal beliefs or their health status and should not be commented on. Districts should not tolerate bullying of any kind of students who continue wearing masks.

Q: What is being done to protect students and staff who are at greater risk of COVID-19?

A: Public health experts continue to recommend full vaccination and masking for those who are at greater risk for serious COVID-related health issues. The most important mitigation strategy is to continue increasing the number of students and school employees who are fully vaccinated.

Q: Are masks still required on school buses?

A: No. WA Department of Health guidance recommends a well-fitting mask on school busses, but does not require a mask.

Q: What would cause a local health officer to start requiring masks in schools again?

A: Local health officers have always had the authority in state law to require health and safety mitigation measures in schools when the situation warrants it, and that will not change. Health officers will continue to monitor community case counts and hospitalizations, and they may add new mitigation measures for schools if they deem it necessary.

Q: What happens if a school district stops requiring masks before March 12?

A: School districts are required to follow the law, and the law currently requires masks in schools. If school districts willfully violate state law, they face legal and financial risks.