

Masks Can Be Optional In Illinois School Districts

by Patrick Andriesen
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SPRINGFIELD - Illinois schools can resume in-person learning without masks next month now that the state has clarified its guidance to acknowledge local school boards should decide which COVID-19 policies best fit their students.

Local school boards will have the final say on whether students return to classrooms wearing masks this fall, a spokeswoman for Gov. J.B. Pritzker [said](#) July 13 in response to a blogger.

The clarified guidance reiterates advice from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as the state for safely reopening schools, but ultimately defers the adoption of prevention strategies to local school boards. It also brings Illinois in line with neighboring [Midwestern](#) states including Indiana, Wisconsin and Iowa, which fully reopened without renewing statewide in-school mask restrictions.

The clarification was prompted when political blogger Rich Miller of CapitolFax contacted Pritzker's office about the state's newly adopted CDC guidance for schools. Miller was given access to a communication the Illinois State Board of Education shared with schools, which stated: "The Illinois Department of Public Health has fully adopted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated guidance for schools released on July 9. View the [guidance](#) and the [press release](#)."

"Q: Is masking required in schools?"

"A: The CDC guidance that Illinois has fully adopted for all K-12 public and nonpublic schools states: 'Masks should be worn indoors by all individuals (age 2 and older) who are not fully vaccinated. Consistent and correct mask use by people who are not fully vaccinated is especially important indoors and in crowded settings, when physical distancing cannot be maintained.'

"The CDC continues to recommend masking and physical distancing as key prevention strategies. However, if school administrators decide to remove any of the prevention strategies for their school based on local conditions, they should remove them one at a time and monitor closely (with adequate testing through the school and/or community) for any increases in COVID-19 cases. Schools should communicate their strategies and any changes in plans to teachers, staff, and families, and directly to older students, using accessible materials and communication channels, in a language and at a literacy level that teachers, staff, students, and families understand.

"Schools should work with local public health officials to determine the prevention strategies needed in their area by monitoring levels of community transmission (i.e., low, moderate, substantial, or high) and local vaccine coverage, and use of screening testing to detect cases in K-12 schools ... A school in a community with substantial or high transmission, with a low teacher, staff, or student vaccination rate, and without a screening testing program should continue to require masks for people who are not fully vaccinated."

The communication was released in response to ambiguity in the initial [announcement](#) regarding the updated guidance on July 9. The initial announcement prompted questions

from district administrators and parents as to whether adopted guidelines meant COVID-19 precautions, such as masks for unvaccinated students and staff, were recommended or required.

Retired school board member [Steve Lucie](#), of Warsaw, Illinois, was critical of Illinois' top-down approach to COVID-19 school mandates. He said his small school district was just not impacted like some larger districts and decisions should have been made locally.

“The State Board of Education should not have their nose in school operations on such a micro level. And for some reason they continue to dictate specific operational procedures and spread fear,” Lucie said.

He said children cannot receive Tylenol without parental permission, yet parental choice and local control have been absent through the pandemic.

“At the end of the day, it is the people's choice to do what they believe is best for their local districts, and we're not allowed to do that.”

Pritzker's spokeswoman said schools should follow CDC guidance, but the recommendations issued July 9 were “[not a mask mandate](#).” She acknowledged elected school boards have the power to decide what is best for their districts.