

Pritzker Ends Mask Mandate, Modifies Another

by Greg Bishop
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(The Center Square) – Gov. J.B. Pritzker is ending one of his COVID-19 mask mandates and modifying another.

"The intention is to lift the mask mandate in indoor locations by Feb. 28," Pritzker revealed at an unrelated news conference Wednesday morning in Champaign. "Of course, we still have the sensitive locations of K-12 schools, where we have lots of people who are joined together in smaller spaces, thousands of people interacting in one location at a time. And so that's something that will come weeks hence."

Pritzker is expected to expand on his modified mask mandate during a news conference in Chicago Wednesday afternoon.

House Minority Leader Jim Durkin, R-Western Springs, criticized the governor's go-it-alone dictates that supermajority Democrats have left untouched. He said he has not been briefed by the governor on the plan.

"This is the typical approach of the governor over the past two years," Durkin said during an unrelated news conference Wednesday. "I don't know what he plans to say today, but I hope he does what other Democratic governors throughout the nation are doing saying that the masks are done. Let's get back to business as usual. Let's let business operators finally get back to work. Let's let parents and children go back to schools without having to deal with this mask situation."

Durkin sent Pritzker a letter Tuesday, criticizing the governor for not being transparent in managing state government reaction to the pandemic. Wednesday, he said he will continue to challenge the governor's dictates.

"That's my responsibility and my job," Durkin said. "And it's also the same responsibility for the Democrats' side of the aisle as well."

Messages seeking comment from the offices of Illinois House Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch, D-Hillside, and Illinois Senate President Don Harmon, D-Oak Park, were not returned.

Pritzker's mask mandate in schools, along with exclusion policies and vaccine and testing mandates on teachers, was deemed null and void by a Sangamon County Circuit Court judge Friday. The judge said the governor's orders seemed to attempt to circumvent due process rights to challenge issues of quarantine. Pritzker has appealed the temporary restraining order as the underlying issues work through the court process.

The governor lifted his mask mandate for everyone indoors last summer for a few weeks, but then reimplemented the mandate after an about face from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC had then said masks for vaccinated people weren't necessary indoors. Pritzker followed suit, lifting his mandate, even in schools. The CDC then reversed their recommendations back to masking up indoors, saying even vaccinated people can spread COVID-19. Even after that, Pritzker said it would be up to local schools. After schools across the state approved mask-optional policies, the governor then reissued his mandate for schools.

The campaign of Aurora Mayor Richard Irvin, who's seeking the Republican nomination for governor for the right to challenge Pritzker in the November election, sent a statement before the governor's announcement.

"A few short days ago, this Governor refused to end mandates saying we needed to 'follow the science' but today says everyone can remove their masks except the lowest risk population," Irvin said in a statement. "Illinois is being led by a Governor who puts politics and special interests ahead of parents and their children. Enough is enough."

Suburban businessman Gary Rabine, who also is running in the Republican primary for governor, also weighed in.

"Illinois kids and parents go into day five of J.B. Pritzker's mask mandate mess, Rabine said in a statement. "Today, he will compound the chaos by beginning to lift the mandate for the general public but keep it in place for schools. Other states, including those with Democratic Governors, have figured this out. But when politics, not people, are your main concern as Governor, this is what happens. COVID chaos and a crime epidemic are Pritzker's legacy. It's time to take our state back."

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