



To: The Rochester School Board
From: Kent Pekel, Ed.D, Interim Superintendent
Subject: Recommendation Regarding Face Coverings To Protect Students From COVID-19
Date: July 27, 2021

We find ourselves and our school district in a moment of both hope and challenge. The extraordinarily rapid development of vaccines that protect people from COVID-19 and the fact that the vast majority of adults and a growing number of teenagers in our city have decided to accept those vaccines has made possible a return to life that feels close to normal for many of us. At the same time, the Delta variant of the coronavirus is spreading rapidly and is proving to be much more damaging and lethal than the variant of the virus that sent our country and the world into turmoil in 2019.

The recommendation for use of face coverings in Rochester Public Schools that is summarized in this memo and that is outlined in detail in the proposed revision of School Board Policy 808 seeks to achieve balance between the forces of hope and the forces of challenge that define the present moment. It is guided by the best science that we have available but it also seeks to respond to the priorities of parents, educators, and others. It seeks to keep Rochester students both safe and in school.

The policy I recommend the board adopt reflects many aspects of the new guidance that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released earlier this afternoon, but it also differs in important respect. Whereas the CDC now recommends that everyone in K-12 schools wear a mask regardless of their vaccination status, I recommend that the Rochester School Board adopt the following differentiated approach:

1. **Students age 12 and older** are encouraged but not required to wear face coverings inside Rochester Public Schools (RPS) facilities or on the grounds of those facilities.
2. **Students between 2 and 12 years of age** are required to wear face coverings inside RPS facilities. Exceptions to this requirement will be made based upon health status and other factors as outlined in School Board Policy 808. Students between 2 and 12 years of age are not required to wear face coverings when they are outside of school district facilities but on the grounds of those facilities.
3. **Students between 0 and 2 years of age** are not required to wear any face coverings in any situation.
4. **Staff and other adults** who are authorized to spend time in RPS facilities or on RPS grounds are encouraged but not required to wear face coverings regardless of vaccine status.

I recommend that Rochester Public Schools take this differentiated approach after reviewing recommendations from the CDC, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and other leading

organizations. I have also relied on analysis and input from our school district's COVID Advisory Team, which includes health experts and leading educators from our school district and representatives of Olmsted County's Public Health Services and the Mayo Clinic.

The insights I have gained from those experts have led me to conclude that given the high vaccination rates and low infection rates in our community, we should encourage but not require students who are 12 years of age or older to wear face coverings. The high vaccination rates and low rates of COVID-19 in Olmsted County also lead me to recommend that staff be encouraged but not required to wear face coverings in our facilities during the 2021-2022 school year. Of course, if rates of infection begin to rise among young people and adults ages 12 and older in the coming weeks or months, the Rochester School Board could and should revisit this approach.

In contrast, because our students between the ages of 2 and 12 are not yet able to be vaccinated, I recommend that the board require students in that age group to wear face coverings until vaccines have been approved and widely administered for that age group. While it is true that young children are much less likely than adults to become seriously ill due to COVID-19, the virus nonetheless poses a significant threat to the health of our youngest learners. A recent [report](#) from PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia succinctly summarizes the state of the science as follows:

COVID-19 has led to mild infections in the vast majority of children, however, some children have had more significant illness. Among the nearly 80 million children and adolescents in the U.S., there have been more than 4 million documented cases of COVID-19, nearly 17,000 hospitalizations, more than 4,000 cases of Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome (MIS-C), a delayed, post-infectious complication of COVID-19 infection, and more than 300 deaths. The risk of "long-haul" COVID-19 for children remains unknown.

Here in Rochester, we know that a significant number of the students in our schools have health conditions that make them more susceptible to serious illness and even death due to COVID-19. Parents of Rochester students have reported that over 1,500 of the young people we serve have asthma, over 200 of them have epilepsy, over 70 of them have cardiac and circulatory congenital anomalies, and over 50 of them have diabetes. Given that those figures only include cases that parents proactively reported to our school staff, the numbers in each of those categories are almost certainly much higher. That is especially true for health conditions that carry social stigma, such as obesity, which parents seldom report but that we know are common among our students today.

While I am confident that the recommendation outlined in this memo and described in the proposed revision of School Board Policy 808 are a prudent approach to keeping our students and staff safe, this is a fast moving situation as the virus evolves and the science advances. As a result, we will continually monitor the situation in collaboration with the school district's COVID Advisory Team and other experts. If and when the data suggests that safety of our students and staff are at risk, I will immediately recommend that the policy be reviewed and potentially revised.

In addition to the approach to face coverings outlined in this memo, in the coming weeks we will announce a broader strategy for keeping students safe through social distancing and other steps.