



## **COVID-19 Policies Update**

October 29, 2021

Dear Parents and Guardians:

This communication provides an update to the Diocese of Youngstown COVID-19 Policy. We are grateful for the support you have shown your school administrator and teachers who have nothing but the safety of your children at heart. All of the actions that have been taken and will be taken in the future are intended to provide a learning environment that engages the students and allows them to participate as fully as possible in the life of the school community.

COVID has been an evolving and fluid situation for all aspects of society for the last two years, and it promises to continue to be a factor in our lives. We continue to monitor and modify our policy as needed to ensure in-person instruction and to be cognizant of the common good. We ask for your patience as we navigate through our current times.

A temporary mask mandate was instituted in August as a response to the rising COVID-19 cases at that time. Our goal was and is to keep our schools open for in-person instruction and allow many of the school routines and opportunities to be more fully available to our students. When a county is in the high category for COVID, masks allow a measure of support for all staff and student safety, including those more vulnerable. With the higher case numbers, masks still allow for the return of instructional, enrichment, and traditional experiences that had to be sacrificed for over a year and a half. Being able to participate in a more normal routine, even with wearing masks during a part of the school day, supports the social and emotional needs of our students and staff. The reasons behind our policy were stated clearly by Bishop Bonnar in his letter of August 25<sup>th</sup> addressed to parents.

Any review of the policy, along with revisions, is always made in consultation with Bishop Bonnar, state and local health officials and guidelines, and the input of principals who deal with this at the local level. We are grateful to Dr. James Kravec from Mercy Health, as well as our state and local health departments, whose guidance has been invaluable and always graciously given.

### **A temporary mandatory mask policy was put into place on August 20. Is it still in effect?**

Our temporary mandatory mask policy is still in effect, as the criteria communicated to all on August 22 as the means communicated to return to a voluntary masking policy have not yet been met. ***“When a county dips below 100 cases per 100,000 people two weeks in a row (keeping in mind that only drops a county to substantial risk level), the local health department will be consulted for any additional information for the area. The circumstances in each school will also be taken into account. Mandates will be lifted by school and county.”***

### **How are the criteria monitored?**

We review this now daily and communicate progress to our schools on a weekly basis; or sooner if the county would reach the desired levels. The numbers are not secret and can easily be accessed by anyone. **We use the CDC County Tracker, since data is updated daily to provide a clearer picture of the trends. This can be found here:**

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/more/aboutcovidcountycheck/index.html>

As of October 29, the cases per 100,000 in each county are as follows:

Ashtabula	Columbiana	Mahoning	Portage	Stark	Trumbull
291.03	402.42	249.25	249.90	231.78	237.40

### During a period of a temporary mask mandate, when does a person have to wear a mask?

- When moving around in the halls or classrooms or going from place to place.
- When seated in a stationary position closer than three feet apart.
- When a school makes a determination that a situation would be safer if a mask should be worn, i.e., music class, close group collaboration, playing board games during indoor recess, etc.

### During a period of a temporary mask mandate, when does a mask not need to be worn?

- When outdoors, at recess, or in gym class.
- When seated three feet apart or more.

### If there is direct contact exposure in the school setting, who needs to quarantine when there is a mandatory mask policy in place?

If masks are properly worn and social distancing practiced, no quarantines are necessary. Parents are notified so that they can monitor for symptoms their child may exhibit. If symptoms are present, the student must stay home and follow any testing, isolation, or quarantining procedures with the local health department. However, exposures/ direct contacts happening outside the school setting are still subject to quarantine for 14 days with consultation with the local health department. Schools continue to consult with the local health departments and follow their guidelines.

### Are Masks Required for Athletic Contests in a School Building?

While there are no OHSAA Guidelines for this at this time, a school has the right to require masks worn by spectators if a contest is held within their school building.

### How will Families know when the temporary mask mandate will be lifted?

Since the criteria are determined by the county rate, schools may move to this at different times. Communication will be sent when the criteria are reached. **Unless other information becomes available prior, a status update will be sent before Thanksgiving to all families.**

---

### When the Diocese moves to a Voluntary Mask Policy, what will it look like?

1. Masks will still be highly encouraged to be worn, and the schools will continue their mitigation protocols. Moving to the voluntary policy moves a county from the high-risk category to the substantial risk category, so COVID-19 still will be circulating in the community.
2. Schools will have the ability to choose one of two paths based on the needs of their school community.

#### OPTION 1: Continue a mandatory masking policy.

Some schools have already expressed their desire to continue a mandatory masking policy since it has worked well to keep students in school, continue with sports and other extra-curricular activities.

**Option 2: Transition to a voluntary masking policy and adopt the newly released protocols by the Ohio Department of Health: Mask to Stay/ Test to Play.**

We have reviewed the recent guidance released on October 25 by Dr. Bruce Vanderhoff and the Ohio Department of Health. You are encouraged to read the entire **Mask to Stay/ Test to Play** guidance at this link.

<https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/static/responsible/schools/k-12-schools-quarantine-alternative.pdf>

This guidance ONLY applies to exposure/ direct contact inside the school program.

- If a student or staff member has direct contact with COVID-19 at school, they must wear a mask for 14 days but are able to continue to attend school in person. Parents and Guardians will be informed so possible symptoms can be monitored.
- If a student or staff member is exposed during athletics or other school-sponsored extra-curricular activity, the person must wear a mask when able, take an initial test when notified of exposure, and then another test in 5-7 days.
- Please read the entire guidance here for the details: <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/static/responsible/schools/k-12-schools-quarantine-alternative.pdf>
- Any student or staff member identified as a direct contact of an in-school positive case and who chooses not to follow the **Mask to Stay/ Test to Play** guidelines must quarantine for 14 days.
- Any student or staff member who tests positive for COVID-19 must still quarantine for 14 days with consultation of the local health department.

Exposures/ Direct contacts of students and staff that happen outside of the school in social gatherings or in a family setting must still quarantine for 14 days. The local health department is consulted for guidance as before. Please do not send a child to school who is exposed outside of school with a mask expecting them to stay.

**In addition to the above guidance, when a voluntary mask policy is in place, masks may be required in the following circumstances:**

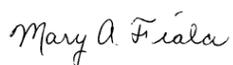
- The federal mandate to wear masks on public transportation, including school busses, is still in effect.
- If there is a COVID outbreak at a school, after consultation with the local health officials, the school reserves the right to return to a temporary two-week mask mandate.
- Extra protocols may be required on field trips based on the circumstances or at a special school event.

## **Vaccinations**

Vaccinations are an important tool in stopping the spread of the virus. Currently, the vaccination rates of eligible people in all of our six counties range from 50.7% to 58.5%.

COVID-19 vaccinations are not mandatory in the Diocese of Youngstown schools. Vaccinations are currently available for persons 12 and over and soon to be available for children five and over. Parents and guardians are encouraged to discuss this with their pediatricians. COVID-19 vaccinations are morally acceptable according to the Catholic Church. Pope Francis has called it "...an act of love. Love for oneself, love for our families and friends, and love for all peoples."

Sincerely in Christ,



Mary Fiala  
Superintendent of Schools