

Hanover Public Schools
Protocols Regarding Masking
REVISED PROPOSED DRAFT (10/11/2021)

The Hanover Public School District recognizes the importance of maintaining healthy schools. Protecting the mental and physical health of our students and staff remain a priority for our district. In furtherance of our commitment to the mental and physical health of our students and staff, the Hanover Public Schools issues the following policy regarding masking in the Hanover Public Schools.

The current mask mandate and guidance issued by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (hereinafter “DESE”) requires the masking of all students through November 1, 2021, unless certain vaccination thresholds are met.¹ DESE has not provided data thresholds that would allow Districts to be mask optional for all students and staff and DESE currently has the authority to can extend the mask mandate indefinitely without offramps for students who are ineligible for the vaccine. This has been criticized as an overreach of the DESE authority to protect the health and well-being of schools throughout the Commonwealth.

The current DESE mandate raises numerous issues for school districts. These areas of concern have been brought to DESE’s attention by the Hanover School Committee as a collective body, as well as by individual members. None of the inquiries and concerns have received a substantive response from DESE. This lack of response and DESE’s failure to address or acknowledge the District’s legitimate concerns have left the District with no ability to seek resolution, clarification or further guidance regarding the DESE mandate. These concerns include but are not limited to the following:

- Requiring masks for students until specified vaccination rates are met is not reasonably related to the risk of COVID-19 transmission to the school population. As acknowledged by the CDC, studies have established that vaccinated individuals can carry a similar viral load as those who are unvaccinated, thus posing the same risk of transmission to the

¹ DESE guidance currently requires that all students be masked (unless an appropriate exemption is filed) until a school can demonstrate an 80% vaccination rate. If a school can meet this threshold, vaccinated students and staff are exempted from the masking requirement if the school district endorses that option. [DESE Policy on Vaccination Rate Threshold, September 27, 2021 \(mass.edu\)](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/de-se-policy-on-vaccination-rate-threshold-september-27-2021)

school population as unvaccinated students and staff.^{2 3} The DESE policy providing different masking requirements of individuals based solely upon vaccination status is not reasonably related to the risk of transmission and is not reasonably related to keeping our schools and students healthy. The DESE policy relies only on vaccination rates without reference to community data points that the CDC has recognized as accurate measures of the threat of COVID-19 spread, specifically the community positivity rate and total new cases per 100,000 over a 7-day period.⁴

- Failure to adequately account for local community COVID-19 response and mitigation. The Hanover community has invested substantial resources into keeping its students and schools safe, including assessment and upgrading of school ventilation systems, aggressive contact tracing and testing, and has access to the nationally recognized Mobile Integrated Health program, which provides free daily PCR testing of resident and provides individual within 24 hours. These factors are weighed in national guidance measuring COVID-19 risk, including CDC guidance, but are not included in the DESE policy, which relies only upon vaccination rates.⁵ In addition to the above factors, the Hanover community has a strong vaccination rate with 75% of the population having received at least one dose of the vaccine, and 69% of the community being fully vaccinated.^{6 7} By student age group, 70% of individuals ages 12-15 have received one dose of the vaccine and 60% are fully vaccinated. In the age range of 16 to 19 years old,

² Statement from CDC Director Rochelle P. Walensky, MD, MPH, "...Delta infection resulted in similarly high SARS-CoV-2 viral loads in vaccinated and unvaccinated people. High viral loads suggest an increased risk of transmission and raised concern that, unlike with other variants, vaccinated people infected with Delta can transmit the virus." [Statement from CDC Director Rochelle P. Walensky, MD, MPH on Today's MMWR | CDC Online Newsroom | CDC](#). Referring to Brown CM, Vostok J, Johnson H, et al. Outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 Infections, Including COVID-19 Vaccine Breakthrough Infections, Associated with Large Public Gatherings — Barnstable County, Massachusetts, July 2021. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2021;70:1059-1062. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7031e2>

³ Researchers studied viral levels at diagnosis in 869 patients, including 632 who were asymptomatic and found no statistically significant differences in average viral loads between vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals, or between those with or without symptoms, or among different age groups, genders, or vaccine types, according to a report posted prior to peer review on medRxiv

<https://bit.ly/3uLNecz> <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.09.28.21264262>

⁴ Christie A, Brooks JT, Hicks LA, et al. Guidance for Implementing COVID-19 Prevention Strategies in the Context of Varying Community Transmission Levels and Vaccination Coverage. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2021;70:1044–1047. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7030e2.htm>

⁵ See [Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools | CDC](#), updated August 5, 2021.

⁶ Per the Massachusetts Weekly COVID-19 Municipality Vaccination Report – September 23, 2021.

<https://www.mass.gov/doc/weekly-covid-19-municipality-vaccination-report-september-23-2021/download>

⁷ The Committee acknowledges that in addition to levels of immunity provided by vaccination, recent studies establish that a level of immunity exists for those previously infected by the COVID-19 virus. Jeffrey P Townsend, Hayley B Hassler, Zheng Wang, Sayaka Miura, Jaiveer Singh, Sudhir Kumar, Nancy H Ruddle, Alison P Galvani, Alex Dornburg. [The durability of immunity against reinfection by SARS-CoV-2: a comparative evolutionary study. The Lancet Microbe](#), 2021; DOI: [10.1016/S2666-5247\(21\)00219-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2666-5247(21)00219-6). The duration of such immunity is not predictable and as such does not provide the basis for this policy. It is, however, worth noting that as of October 4, 2021, 369 Hanover students, or approximately 15% of the District's enrollment, have tested positive for the COVID-19 virus.

93% have received one dose of the vaccine and 86% are fully vaccinated.⁸ Mandating the same protocols for every community throughout Massachusetts without reference to community mitigation protocols, vaccination rates and resources fails to account for community specific COVID mitigation, and thus fails to adequately assess a community's risk of COVID transmission.

- Health and privacy implications resulting from allowing masking based upon vaccination status. Requiring only unvaccinated students and staff to wear masks necessarily identifies those who are not vaccinated. This disparate treatment based upon vaccination status, also allows for the potential of bullying and harassment of students.
- Enforcement. Requiring unvaccinated students to wear masks requires that non-medical personnel be informed of students' vaccination status to ensure proper enforcement of the policy (i.e. that only vaccinated students are unmasked). This raises privacy concerns.
- Equity for younger students not eligible for vaccination. A joint memorandum issued by DESE and the Department of Public Health (hereinafter "DPH"), dated August 27, 2021, states, "even for those students not yet vaccinated, the apparent risk of COVID-19 to children remains small."⁹ Despite the acknowledgement of low risk DESE's policy ties masking solely to vaccination rates, which provides no ability for younger students who are ineligible for vaccination, and staff in our elementary schools, to have an unmasking option. This applies even where community data indicators are low and there is no evidence of in school transmission.

Policy

As recognized by the CDC, "A person's risk for SARS-CoV-2 infection is directly related to the risk for exposure to infectious persons, which is largely determined by the extent of SARS-CoV-2 circulation in the surrounding community."¹⁰ In order to address the issues identified above, while recognizing the threat of COVID-19 to the well-being of our school population, the Hanover School Committee hereby enacts the following policy that is designed to assess the community risk to our schools, staff and students and to take appropriate mitigation measures that relate directly to the community risk level:

⁸ Per the Massachusetts Weekly COVID-19 Municipality Vaccination Report – September 23, 2021.

<https://www.mass.gov/doc/weekly-covid-19-municipality-vaccination-report-september-23-2021/download>

⁹ Joint DESE/DPH Memo "DESE/DPH COVID-19 Guidance for Districts and Schools: Fall 2021" dated August 27, 2021 (updated). <https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/fall-2021-covid19-guide/fall-2021-covid19-guide.pdf>

¹⁰ Christie A, Brooks JT, Hicks LA, et al. Guidance for Implementing COVID-19 Prevention Strategies in the Context of Varying Community Transmission Levels and Vaccination Coverage. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2021;70:1044–1047. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7030e2.htm>

1. All students will wear masks until the following conditions are met:
 - Pooled testing enrollment reaches 50% of a school's student population. As vaccinated students can transmit SARS-COV-2, all students regardless of vaccination status will be counted toward the 50% enrollment requirement. Pooled testing provides an accurate and timely measure of the presence of SARS-CoV-2 virus in our schools and provides information relative to school spread.
2. Once a school reaches pooled testing enrollment of 50%, all students and staff regardless of vaccination status will be permitted to unmask provided the following conditions are met:
 - Community positivity rates and daily case averages remain under the moderate threshold¹¹ as established by the CDC and the school population positivity rate as established by pool testing and outside test results remains under 2% (the established CDC marker for low incidence of community transmission is a percentage positivity rate of under 5%).
3. Should community positivity rates and daily case averages exceed the moderate threshold as established by CDC, the Hanover school population shall be required to wear masks and Hanover Public School will consult with public health agencies regarding ongoing mitigation protocols.
4. Should a school demonstrate evidence of in-school transmission of the virus as determined by school officials, or should school positivity rates exceed 2%, the students and staff in that school population will be required to wear masks. Hanover Public School will consult with public health agencies regarding ongoing mitigation protocols.
5. At any time, school officials and this Committee retain the right to impose stricter mask requirements upon the school community should school officials, in consultation with public health officials determine that doing so is advisable to protect the health of our schools, students and staff.
6. As required by Federal regulations, students will be required to wear masks while on school buses and school transportation.
7. At any time, students and staff may choose to wear masks. The school population will be respectful of individual choices regarding masking.

¹¹ Pursuant to the CDC Guidance as updated August 26th, moderate community transmission is indicated by less than 50 new cases per 100,000 within the preceding 7 days and a test positivity rate below 8%. See, [COVID-19 County Check Tool: Understanding Community Transmission Levels in Your County](#) (updated September 30, 2021).

The goal of this policy is to provide a safe and healthy learning environment for our staff and students while respecting the Committee's priorities of equity, privacy, and fairness.