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## U.S. EDUCATION

# U.S. Schools Put Covid-19 Safety Measures in Rearview, Dividing Some Parents

Districts redirect attention from Covid-19 testing and mask mandates to academic problems; 'We're in a new place now'



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Schools nationwide are eliminating Covid-19 protocols as students return for fall, shifting resources from combating the waning virus to addressing academic crises that cropped up during the pandemic.

Districts across the country are reducing testing, de-emphasizing social distancing and dropping mask mandates that were in place for the start of classes last year. A handful are still requiring masks or attempting vaccine directives.

With deaths and hospitalizations linked to the current subvariants largely stabilizing, school officials say they have other pressing matters to attend to, such as learning loss, enrollment declines and staffing shortages.

Los Angeles will discontinue its weekly testing program when classes begin Aug. 15, and officials in New York City say they are considering the same. Districts in Illinois, Washington, Colorado and Texas are also loosening Covid-19 rules.

As of Aug. 11, eight of the country's largest 500 school districts required masks for all students, according to Burbio Inc., a data company that tracks K-12 school masking policies.

The changes are in line with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention which on Thursday issued new guidelines reducing safety precautions for a host of settings, including schools.

The new guidance scaled back recommendations for quarantining students exposed to the virus. The agency also dropped its endorsement of regular testing to screen for Covid-19 in schools, and ended its support of a tactic called test-to-stay, which kept exposed students in the classroom through frequent testing.

The federal government's investment of about \$190 billion in pandemic-relief funding helped the nation's schools defray the costs of testing and other Covid-19 precautions, said Ray Hart, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of large, urban public-school districts.

But now schools are looking to address other issues that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic, such as learning interruptions.

"Districts don't want to sacrifice safety for academics," he said. "At the same time, we'll be making investments in the academic needs of kids."

School is starting as this summer's wave of the coronavirus, fueled by the BA.5 subvariant, is leveling off, according to federal data that shows that the number of people hospitalized because of Covid-19 has begun to trend downward. The seven-day daily average for new hospital patients admitted as of Aug. 2 was 6,112, according to the CDC, a decrease of more than 4% from the prior seven-day average.

In Los Angeles, home to the nation's second-largest school district, Covid-19 precautions will largely be left up to parent preference. Masking will be strongly recommended indoors but not mandatory, which follows local and state health authority guidance and is how the district ended the last school year.



Teachers and staff must be vaccinated against Covid-19, but the district has backed away from pressing for a vaccine requirement for students.

“We’re in a new place now,” Smita Malhotra, Los Angeles Unified School District’s medical director, said this week.

LAUSD was one of few places nationwide last school year to conduct weekly tests on all students and staff, regardless of symptoms. The testing program cost the district more than \$500 million, which the district will cover using federal stimulus funds or through reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

This year, LAUSD is encouraging families to take rapid tests before school starts and again one week into the year. The district has a stockpile of more than two million tests to hand out, and Dr. Malhotra said anyone who tests positive must notify their school of the result.

“Our goal as a school district is to make sure every student has access to in-person learning,” she said.

Jennifer McAfee, an eighth-grade teacher in the district, said in a statement issued through the LAUSD teacher union that educators want the district to continue requiring students to answer a daily health questionnaire, put forth clear isolation guidelines and encourage indoor mask use. “We have not lost sight of how difficult the last two years have been and the toll this pandemic has had on our students,” she said.

Los Angeles parents are divided on the relative return to normalcy. More than 6,000 parents have signed a petition calling for stricter Covid-19 precautions, with some speaking out at a recent school-board meeting.

Others, like Joel Delman, the parent of two high-school students, agree with the district's policies. "I hope it feels so normal that they take it for granted," he said of his children's first day of school. However, Mr. Delman said he worries about staff or classmates pressuring others to wear masks.

Some parents at a middle school in Oakland, Calif., said they felt such pressure this week as school began, after receiving a robocall from the school principal.

"We know that masks are not mandated at this time. However, we ask that you provide a mask for your student and that they wear it inside of our buildings," Montera Middle School Principal Latoya Williams said on the recording. "We want to continue keeping our community safe." A sign outside the school also included the message, "Let's Wear Our Masks!"

A spokesman for Oakland Unified School District said that the majority of students and staff have worn masks indoors since school started Monday, and that district and county guidelines are to strongly encourage mask use.

Sharon Desmoulin-Kherat, superintendent of schools for Peoria, Ill., said her district did away with its school-based testing program for the current school year, which began there on Aug. 3.

Dr. Desmoulin-Kherat said families are testing at home instead and so far, six of 12,800 students have had to miss school because they tested positive.

"We're in a really good spot, where staff are able to come to work, and students are not being excluded," she said.

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