

CORONAVIRUS

Mask wearing returns to some schools as county COVID rates increase

By Pete Bannan
pbannan@21st-centurymedia.com

With the increasing number of positive COVID-19 tests in Delaware County, a number of school districts are again looking to require students and staff to wear masks when classes resume this fall.

At a special board meeting of the Wallingford-Swarthmore School District Monday evening the board revised its health and safety plan calling for masks this coming fall.

New Superintendent Dr. Wagner Marseille updated the board on the plan. He noted that Delaware County has moved from moderate spread to substance spread this past week and the positivity and hospitalizations rates are both rising. Positivity rates of testing have gone from just over 1 percent to above 3 percent in the past four weeks, while cases has gone from the single digits to more than 40 per day over the same time.

"I do believe that there needs to be additional layers of mitigation," said Marseille. "Two of the significant areas are the use of masks and physical distancing."

As of Aug. 16 individuals

who are not vaccinated and under 12 years old are required to wear a mask indoors. This would mean all students in grades K-5 would return to school with masks.

A federal mandate requires everyone on district transportation to wear a mask. The district will also enact 3-foot social distancing again this year. They will also work to improve airflow in buildings.

Marseille said they believe data from June shows that more than 51 percent of students eligible have been vaccinated.

"Maybe those numbers have gone up. We don't have that information," Marseille said.

Board members asked if the district has the authority to require vaccinations. Officials said they do not appear to at this time but some districts are moving in that direction.

Board member Wendy Voet offered an amendment to the plan that would trigger indoor universal masking for all students and staff, including those vaccinated, in all district buildings including the middle and high school if the positivity rate rises above 50 cases per 100,000 over a seven-day period. It would

be lifted if the rates fell over a two week period.

Voet noted that this requirement could reduce the number of students forced to quarantine out of school as masking reduces the spread.

"We want policies that help keep kids in school, I do think that masks when rates are higher can help keep kids in school, sort of a risk based approach," said board President David Grande. "At some point we will have to move past these some of these measures, I don't think we are there yet, we might get there soon when it comes to broader eligibility for vaccines."

Officials were frustrated with the Aug. 1 end of Chester County Department of Health's assistance to Delaware County, which took away the ability to see cases in the local community. The positivity rate is only on a county level.

In public comments the views were split on mask requirements.

The first speaker was impassioned voicing her displeasure at having children wear masks when school reopens. She pointed out students have been together during the summer on fields, in the weight room, and the gymnasium with-



VIDEO CLIP YOUTUBE

One parent and her daughter spoke out against the masks at the Wallingford-Swarthmore School Board meeting Monday evening.

out masks and without any spread of the illness.

The speaker went through 15 points against masks and continued to speak after the allotted three minutes ended. After refusing the boards' request to end her comments, they cut her microphone. When she did not stop speaking they went into recess.

Returning a few minutes later, board Vice President Kelly Wachtman reminded those speaking of the requirement of the three-minute public comment limit.

One woman, a pediatrician, said everyone agrees that kids need to go back to school but that COVID-19 is not behind us and the delta variant has changed the game as those vaccinated can transmit the virus as easily as those unvaccinated.

One parent said, "No one can tell me what I can and can't do with my child." He said he would take his children out of the district schools which would hit the district in the wallet.

One speaker said he was not anti-mask but questioned why younger students are being required to wear them. He said he fully supports those who want to wear masks but students should have the right to choose not to wear them.

A man said making masks is not a personal choice because when only some people wear them that destroys the effectiveness.

"Freedom doesn't mean you can do whatever you please, it means you share a variety of rights with everyone else," he said. "If there is a chance of spreading a disease to others you have

a responsibility to protect their right not to get sick."

One speaker questioned the safety of both masks and vaccines and said the pandemic is causing more mental health issues. She said her child will be showing up on the first day of sixth grade without a mask. The board again shut her microphone off after she went overtime.

One man who said he was a scientist said data can be changed to fit a narrative and said children are not being hurt by the virus.

One woman called masks a "show" and said if masks are required she will home school her children instead.

One parent noted it has been a terribly traumatizing time for everyone. She also said as a pediatrician in palliative care, she has

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seen children die of the virus and that masks are a prevention tactic such as seatbelts.

One man said life involves risks and everything has risks. He said the risks to children is minimal and masks were going overboard.

One parent said she doesn't care what other parents will be doing about masking their children; she will mask her child and believes the teachers should also be wearing masks while they are in front of her children.

The board approved the health and safety plan as well as the amendment requiring full masking in all buildings. An additional amendment will require

all sixth grade students to wear masks even if they are vaccinated when the rest of their school must wear a mask.

The entire board meeting is viewable on the district YouTube channel.

In the Upper Darby School District all staff and students will be required to mask while indoors when school opens on Aug. 30.

"We are requiring masking throughout the District from time to time in order to keep our schools open, reduce the potential for student and staff isolation, and to prevent the spread of the virus," said a message on the district website. "The district will not be requiring masking during outdoor athletic competitions. When the district/county moves out of substantial for at least 14 days, we will continue to require masking of students ages 11

and under and recommend masking of eligible unvaccinated individuals."

Rose Tree Media School Superintendent Dr. Eleanor Dimarion-Linnen said her district is following the standard that under substantial to high community transmission, they are masking all students and staff K-12 indoors in all school buildings.

Under moderate to low, masking is optional in Rose Tree's 7th-12th grades and masking is required for all K-6th grade students and staff until vaccination implementation for the 5- 11 year old age group occurs.

Rose Tree Media will meet by December 2021 to review the status of vaccination for this age group as well as county transmission levels, the Superintendent said.

On Tuesday Haverford School District Superinten-

dent Maureen Reusche sent a letter to parents advising parents with the county back in the substantial level of spread, the district will now require masks to be worn indoors.

Reusche said the federal Centers for Disease Control recommends universal indoor masking for all teachers, staff, students, and visitors to K-12 schools, regardless of vaccination status. She also said the state Department of Health and the state Department of Education recommend that people in areas with substantial or high COVID-19 transmission resume masking indoors in public areas regardless of vaccination status.

In Chester Upland, the district is working to make vaccines available for all students with a number of clinics throughout the month.