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Archbishop Thomas J. Rodi of Mobile, Ala., visits students at Little Flower Catholic School in M

Archbishop Thomas J. Rodi of Mobile, Ala., visits students at Little Flower Catholic School in Mobile Sept. 16, 2021. (CNS photo/Jennifer Tolbert, Archdiocese of Mobile)



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This fall, as the number of COVID-19 cases has decreased, some dioceses, particularly in the South, are loosening restrictions on mask mandates for Catholic schools.

Diocesan leaders who announced these changes stressed that these decisions were made carefully and with the caveat they could always be reversed if cases increased.

When the school year started, there was no universal mask mandate for Catholic schools; some had strict policies, others had no

requirements and some had more restrictions in place for younger grade levels.

Louisiana's statewide mask mandate ended Oct. 27 but masks were still required in public schools; nonpublic schools did not have to follow this requirement.

"Given declining infection rates not only in the Greater Baton Rouge Area but throughout Louisiana, I am now modifying several of our practices based upon medical advice, wisdom, and recommendations from state leaders," said Baton Rouge Bishop Michael G. Duca in an Oct. 26 letter announcing that masks will no longer be required in diocesan churches and schools, effective immediately.

"While these changes will come as welcome news to many," he said, "I continue to encourage diligence throughout our community since this pandemic has not yet ended. It has been my goal and that of our diocesan leaders to ensure that everyone in our parishes and schools are kept as safe as possible."

He also said if the situation should change, these guidelines could again be revised.

A similar letter Nov. 5 from Archbishop Thomas J. Rodi of Mobile, Alabama, said that starting Nov. 8 masks would be optional in archdiocesan schools.

He said he was grateful for the support from parents, students and faculty members "as we continue to navigate the difficulties of the pandemic" and that the decreasing COVID-19 rate allowed for this change in the current policy.

"We trust that parents will make the best decisions for their children and ask that our school communities respect the decisions of others," he wrote.

The archbishop also noted that for those who are not vaccinated: "We highly recommend, but will not require, that face masks continue to be worn while indoors. We encourage families to seek guidance from their physicians regarding the vaccine."

Like other Catholic leaders currently addressing this issue, he said: "We will continue to monitor the impact of COVID-19 in our schools and in our communities. Protocols in response to any changes will be adjusted accordingly."

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The Diocese of Nashville, Tennessee, similarly lifted its mask requirement for schools Oct. 28, due to the decrease in COVID-19 cases during September and October.

In a letter to parents, Rebecca Hammel, diocesan superintendent of schools, said diocesan officials "consulted our medical panel, school pastors and principals, and evaluated our school and community data."

She said parents will determine if their children should wear face masks and that the Catholic Schools Office will continue to monitor case counts and community health conditions closely, as will each school. Individual schools might resume the mask mandate if school officials find it necessary, she added.

Hammel said there is still a need to exercise caution, especially for those at school who live with vulnerable family members and may wish to continue to wear a face mask.

In response to families who have asked if the diocese will require proof of vaccination for Catholic school students and faculty, she said that Nashville Bishop J. Mark Spalding "remains committed to his desire for parents to make an informed decision for their children. Our faculty and staff members are encouraged to exercise the same prudence themselves."

The Miami Archdiocese announced a modified loosening of school mask requirements Oct. 29. Jim Rigg, superintendent of schools, said that beginning Nov. 8 masks will be optional for fully vaccinated students and teachers in grades seven and eight with proof of vaccination.

Until now, masks had been required for all teachers and students in elementary schools, regardless of vaccination status. Vaccinated teachers in grade six and lower will continue to be required to wear masks.

Masks will continue to be required for high school teachers and students who are not vaccinated and remain optional for those who show proof of vaccination. Masks continue to be optional outdoors for everyone in elementary and secondary schools.

"Please note that, while this is good news, it is important that COVID-related protocols remain in our Catholic schools for the protection of all students and employees," Rigg's letter said. "Likewise, we will continue to closely monitor COVID

trends and may need to reintroduce more restrictive practices if trends worsen."

"Perhaps most crucially," he added, "it is very important that all eligible individuals receive a vaccine. While vaccinations are not required for attendance or employment at a Catholic school, we highly encourage you to receive a vaccination if you have not already done so. "

Rigg cited dropping rates of COVID-19 infections in South Florida, as Miami Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski had done in his Oct. 28 letter to archdiocesan pastors, in which he also warned that "if the numbers go in the opposite direction, we may have to reinstate some of these protocols."

"We continue to encourage all to be vaccinated as this offers the best way of putting this pandemic behind us," the archbishop wrote.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued formal recommendations Nov. 2 for children as young as 5 years old to get vaccinated against COVID-19. The CDC continues to recommend universal indoor masking by all students, staff, teachers, and school visitors, regardless of vaccination status.

Not all Catholic schools are lifting this requirement though. Catholic schools in the Boston Archdiocese last year did not have a mask mandate, but put one in place this school year.

The archdiocese recently extended this mandate until at least Jan. 15, following an announcement from the state officials that public school students will be required to wear face masks until that date.

The neighboring Massachusetts dioceses of Springfield and Worcester did not mandate face masks this year.

In some dioceses where the mask mandate has been in place for its Catholic schools, parents have signed petitions saying this restriction should be lifted and that they should have the choice about what their children do.

Parents in the Atlanta Archdiocese signed one of these petitions.

Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Atlanta, addressed some of the current challenges for students and faculty on its website saying that school officials could not "predict with certainty how this virus will influence how we spend this school year," but they were prepared to provide the best educational experience while

continuing to "balance addressing health concerns."