News

Signs at South Boston Catholic Academy in Boston remind children of precautions to prevent

Signs at South Boston Catholic Academy in Boston remind children of precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the classroom Jan. 28, 2021. (CNS photo/Allison Dinner, Reuters)



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Washington — With coronavirus cases declining in every state, many Catholic school officials are lifting mask requirements at diocesan schools following the lead of governors' announcements about lifting mask mandates for the general public, and in some cases, schools.

Many of the loosened restrictions for Catholic schools are effective as of late February or early March with the caveat the mandate could go back in effect if local coronavirus cases increase.

Mask mandates at schools have caused a lot of debate around the country and Catholic schools have been no exception with parents protesting the requirement and stressing that they should be able to determine if their children wear the face masks or not.

Dioceses that have announced that mask wearing in schools will now be optional also have stressed that schools will be continuing to follow safety protocols put in place with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students are still required to wear masks on buses by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The federal agency also continues to recommend that all students, teachers and staff members at elementary and high schools wear masks, regardless of their vaccination status.

"We're not taking our foot off the pedal. We are continuing to remain vigilant about sanitation, testing and caseloads in the classroom," said James Sellinger, chancellor of Catholic schools for the Baltimore Archdiocese.

He made the comments after the announcement that archdiocesan Catholic schools would adopt an optional mask policy effective Feb. 14 in most jurisdictions that do not mandate masks in schools.

The new policy replaces a previous requirement that masks be worn in all Catholic schools.

"We have been very successful in managing through the pandemic over the last 18 months, partnering with our families," Sellinger told the Catholic Review, the news outlet of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

He said the large drop in the number of COVID-19 cases made the timing right to make masking a matter of parental choice, noting that Maryland's positivity rate of 4.88% is among the lowest in the country.

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In a Feb. 11 letter announcing the policy shift, Sellinger and Donna Hargens, superintendent of Baltimore Catholic schools, said they consulted with governmental and public health advisers, including Dr. Robert Redfield, the former CDC director.

A parishioner at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Baltimore, Redfield now serves as senior public health adviser to Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan.

"This policy change comes at a time when our region is witnessing a significant decline in COVID transmission rates from the omicron variant that emerged in November and resulted in the highest daily case rate since the beginning of the pandemic," the letter said.

It added that the "movement to parental choice masking is about a parent's personal accountability and responsibility for the health and well-being of their children," adding that anyone who wants to wear a mask may continue to do so and "should be treated with respect."

The neighboring Archdiocese of Washington Feb. 21 similarly lifted a mask requirement for students, staff and visitors to Catholic schools located in the five Maryland counties that are part of the archdiocese. It kept the masking requirement for Catholic schools in the District of Columbia in place, following a recent directive from the local government.

Kelly Branaman, the Washington Archdiocese's secretary for Catholic schools, announced the easing of the masking mandate in the Maryland Catholic schools within the archdiocese's jurisdiction.

In a Feb. 17 letter, she said school officials "appreciate and will fully support whatever decisions that parents make for their own children regarding whether to wear a face covering in school or not. Enforcement of this decision is between parent and child, not school personnel."

"While masking has been one of the health and safety protocols that allowed our schools to stay open, experts have begun to acknowledge that masking children has its drawbacks," Branaman wrote.

She said that "many parents and students have asked to ease measures such as mask requirements more quickly. Others say they would feel more comfortable maintaining precautions a while longer."

The archdiocesan decision was based on a number of factors including the drop in COVID-19 cases and a high vaccination rate in the area.

Branaman said the archdiocese will continue to monitor local conditions and would consult public health officials for guidance "if a major spike in cases or a serious variant emerges."

Other dioceses announcing that their schools would be returning to mask-optional policies include the archdioceses of Boston; Newark, New Jersey; and Louisville, Kentucky; and the Diocese of Portland, Maine.

The Archdiocese of Chicago announced masks were optional at its suburban Catholic schools as of Feb. 10 but not in Chicago or the suburbs of Evanston and Oak Park, because local health departments still require them.

A Feb. 8 letter to parents from Greg Richmond, superintendent of schools for the Chicago Archdiocese, said any staff member or student who wishes to continue to wear a mask in school is encouraged to do so. The schools will "support all school families and employees in whichever decision they make regarding the regular use of masks," he said.

He also pointed out that "some school communities as a whole may feel differently about the change to a mask-optional environment" and that the schools office will work with the principals to address the interests of their schools.

A Feb. 17 editorial in The Tablet, newspaper of the Diocese of Brooklyn, New York, pleaded for optional masks at schools.

"It's time to bring this mandate to an end, as new COVID cases and hospitalizations fall to pre-delta variant levels," it said, adding that "many educators in the state have expressed their views on ending the mask mandate."

Catholic school officials in the Brooklyn Diocese and the New York Archdiocese said they hope the mask mandate, which has been challenged in court, will ultimately be lifted.

The Tablet editorial stressed that "parents should be the decision-makers when it comes to whether their children wear masks." It noted that during the pandemic, "many psychologists and psychiatrists are seeing far more adolescent and teenage patients dealing with mental health issues, and hospitals are seeing more children who require mental health care — not treatment for COVID."

"As our youngest students take their traditional mid-winter vacation, politicians in Albany and City Hall need to let the kids go back to normal in our schools when they return from the break," it added.

In the Boston Archdiocese, the mask mandate was to be lifted on the Feb. 28 return from winter break.

A Feb. 9 statement by Thomas Carroll, archdiocesan superintendent of schools, said that in a limited number of instances, the Catholic Schools Office would "consider requests from individual schools where there is a parent consensus and compelling data to continue mask wearing."

He also stressed that he was "proud of our decision to keep our Catholic schools open and doing so in a way that has kept our students, faculty and staff safe during the global pandemic."