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Hochul ends mask requirement in schools; decision to be left with counties

Gov. Kathy Hochul on Sunday announced plans to end the state mask requirement in schools as of Wednesday, March 2.

Her team said she made this decision based on the analysis of several key coronavirus data trends, and after consulting with health and education experts, plus parents, teachers and school administrators.

The announcement also follows recent changes in metrics used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to determine risk and transmission levels in communities.

Hochul's team said, "Other mitigation measures should remain in place."

The governor stated, "With more New Yorkers getting vaccinated, and the steady decline over the past several weeks in cases and hospitalizations from omicron, we are now entering a new phase of the pandemic. Because New Yorkers have stepped up, we can confidently remove the statewide mask requirement in our schools. This is a huge step forward for our kids and communities, and I am grateful to the students, educators and parents for their dedication to keeping us all safe – we've reached this milestone because of your hard work."

Hochul's team said, "New York has made significant progress in the fight against COVID-19.

Among large states, New York has the highest rate of adults fully vaccinated for COVID-19, the highest rate of teenagers fully vaccinated for COVID-19, and the second-highest rate of children ages 5-11 fully vaccinated. New York state has experienced a 98% decline in COVID-19 cases since the omicron peak, and a continuous downward trend in cases for 51 consecutive days.

"The number of children testing positive for COVID is declining to levels not seen since before students returned from summer break; yesterday, 229 cases were reported compared to a seven-day average of 832 cases at the beginning of the school year. Pediatric hospitalizations have declined by roughly 80% since the omicron peak."

Ahead of midwinter break, 4.8 million tests were sent to schools for children to take home. An additional 4.8 million tests will be sent this week for students to take home upon their return to school. In total, 20.8 million tests have been distributed to schools. Over the past six weeks, the state established 261 #VaxForKids sites, bringing the vaccine directly to New York families to help parents and guardians get their eligible children vaccinated and boosted.

State Health Commissioner Dr. Mary T. Bassett said, "Thanks to the hard work of New Yorkers, to-

day we are able to lift the statewide mask requirement for schools. As Gov. Hochul said, we will remain vigilant as New York moves forward, and our team at the Department of Health will continue to monitor the data and advance early warning monitoring systems like wastewater surveillance. We continue to urge all New Yorkers to get vaccinated and get boosted, and we will work with our partners in education statewide to ensure our schools, teachers and students have the support they need to keep our classrooms healthy and safe."

State Education Commissioner Dr. Betty A. Rosa said, "I thank the governor for her leadership. Working together we look forward to keeping our schools safe for students and educators."

Response

Outside of the governor's press release, leaders offered the following comments:

Niagara County Legislature Chairwoman Becky Wydysh said, "Today, Gov. Hochul announced the state mandate requiring masks in schools will be lifted this Wednesday, March 2. It will then be left to individual counties to decide whether to continue such a mandate. We have previously said that Niagara County would not continue that mandate if the decision were left to us. We continue to hold that view and want to be clear that Niagara County will not be implementing any local mask mandate for our schools."

New York State Senate Republican Leader Rob Ortt said, "The unmasking of our school children is a long overdue victory for kids and parents, educators, and common sense.

"It is time to put my resolution up for a vote, end the unnecessary statewide emergency, and end all Albany mandates. Our colleagues across the aisle have refused to act – it's time that we take this up for a vote this week.

"It's time to restore checks and balances, and make sure no governor can do this again. We must empower people, not politicians."

New York State United Teachers President Andy Pallotta said, "We welcome this step toward normalcy. The governor is striking the right balance by empowering local officials to use data to determine if and when the mitigation strategies need to change in their areas. As the guidance changes, one thing must remain constant: It's essential that districts work closely with educators to ensure there is confidence in their health and safety plans."

NYSUT is a statewide union with more than 600,000 members in education, human services and health care. It is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and the AFL-CIO.

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