

Press Clippings 2/10/2022

Daily Herald

Pritzker to drop mask mandate indoors by Feb. 28, but not yet for schools --- 2/9/2022

By Marni Pyke



Gov. J.B. Pritzker gets ready to give a COVID-19 update to reporters Wednesday in the Blue Room at the Thompson Center in Chicago. *Tyler LaRiviere/Chicago Sun-Times via AP*

If COVID-19 metrics continue to improve, Illinoisans can cast off their masks indoors in most public spaces on Feb. 28, Gov. J.B. Pritzker said Wednesday, but schools will need to wait until later in the spring.

"We are now seeing the fastest rate of decline in COVID hospitalization metrics since the pandemic began," Pritzker said. "Our daily total of COVID patients has fallen from over 7,300 to about 2,500 today, a 66% drop.

"If these trends continue, and we expect them to, on Monday, Feb. 28, we will lift the indoor mask requirements for the state."

Universal masking will stay in place at elementary, middle and high schools likely until some weeks after Feb. 28, Pritzker said.

However, a downstate judge on Friday put a temporary restraining order on mask requirements affecting nearly 170 school districts, including dozens of suburban ones, resulting in diverging face covering policies across the state.

School environments pose a higher risk for COVID-19 infections, especially with the highly contagious omicron variant circulating and children ages 5 to 17 having lower vaccination rates than adults, officials said.

"We have kids going to school six to eight hours a day, five days a week, week after week," Pritzker said. "The reality is, schools are quite unusual. Thousands of people often are interacting in a single day and that's very different, and we're trying to take that into account."

Cook County and Chicago have their own indoor mask mandates, but both health departments announced separately Wednesday they also could lift masking rules on Feb. 28 if metrics such as those for cases and hospitalizations decline.

Pritzker noted that many local jurisdictions and businesses have their own mask requirements and entities are allowed to adopt more stringent rules than the state.

Masking will still be necessary on public transit, in health care settings, at day cares, and in congregate settings such as prisons and long-term care facilities.

"While masks will no longer be required in most indoor locations beginning Feb. 28, they are still recommended," Illinois Department of Public Health Director Ngozi Ezike said. "Let me be clear: COVID is not gone." Instead, Illinoisans will need to adjust to "coexist with COVID," she said.

The mask mandate was instituted in August 2021, amid rising caseloads, and Pritzker, who is seeking reelection, faces pressure on multiple sides of the issue. At least five other Democratic governors in the country have rolled back mask rules.

Illinois Republican Senate Leader Dan McConchie said in a statement, "The governor's continued piecemeal approach isn't working and leads to confusion and frustration."

Republican gubernatorial candidate and Aurora Mayor Richard Irvin said Pritzker was being inconsistent and "Illinois is being led by a governor who puts politics and special interests ahead of parents and their children."

Meanwhile, harassed school district administrators just want some clarity after a week so far of walkouts, demonstrations, chaotic board meetings and anxiety in the wake of the judge's mask suspension.

Elgin Area Community Unit District U-46 is still requiring masks.

"While our students have been amazing at complying with the mitigation strategies, the return to masks being optional everywhere but in schools at the end of the month will

certainly add pressure to school principals and teachers to enforce, and superintendents and school boards to explain," Superintendent Tony Sanders said.

So far, "there are no clear metrics from the state regarding when schools can reduce their mitigation strategies. I would like the state to provide our local health departments the ability to determine locally when we can reduce mitigation strategies, which might include making masks optional."

State officials didn't give specific school metrics, but University of Chicago Medicine's Dr. Emily Landon, a Pritzker health adviser, said cases and hospitalizations need to keep decreasing, and it's important that a new subvariant of omicron, BA. 2, does not slow the positive trajectory.

"No one wants kids to be back in remote learning," she said.

Sam Toia, president of the Illinois Restaurant Association said "this is a sure sign of hope for many restaurants throughout our state still struggling to rebuild their businesses."

The Pritzker administration is fighting the restraining order and lawsuits filed on behalf of parents who object to the mask mandate. Attorney General Kwame Raoul has appealed Judge Raylene Grischow's ruling.

"Throughout every minute of this deadly global pandemic, the people of Illinois have demonstrated a willingness to look out for one another and to rise above the loud minority voices who have used this emergency to nay-say, bicker, polarize and divide," Pritzker said.

Chicago Tribune

Illinois parents, educators call for COVID-19 exit strategy after schools left out of Gov. J.B. Pritzker's plan to lift mask mandate --- 2/9/2022

By Karen Ann Cullotta



Students and their families head home after school at St. Raymond School in Mount Prospect on Feb. 9, 2022.

The school is making masks optional. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

With Illinois schools blocked from Gov. J.B. Pritzker's plan to lift the statewide mask mandate, frustrated educators and parents said escalating tensions and plunging virus rates heighten the need for a pandemic exit strategy for beleaguered school districts.

Pritzker announced Wednesday that the indoor mask mandate for most public places would end Feb. 28, and suggested details about the future of masking at schools will be revealed in the coming weeks. But the change for the general public arrives as Illinois school districts continue to struggle with unrest and uncertainty in the wake of an **Illinois judge's decision** that the governor's mask mandate for schools was authorized illegally.

At **Elgin-based Unit School District 46**, Superintendent Tony Sanders said Wednesday that while virus numbers are declining, the district is proceeding with caution and still enforcing the mask requirement with the exception of a handful of students whose parents are plaintiffs in the lawsuit filed against 146 school districts, including District 46.

But Sanders said with the governor's announcement that the general public will be allowed to unmask by the end of the month, "schools do need an exit strategy."

"It's too soon right now to remove masks for students and staff, as our cases locally are still higher from what they were last year, but at the same time, it would be great to have metrics or know what target we are aiming for to ease some of the restrictions on schools," Sanders said.

John Burkey, executive director of the Large Unit District Association, and a former school district superintendent, said Illinois school districts that are still requiring masks are having an increasingly tough time enforcing the mandate, especially with no end in sight to the virus mitigation rules.

"It's really important that our school leaders, teachers and parents know what the off ramp for the mitigations looks like," Burkey said. "They have to know when it might end, even if it's not today, and it would really help if the state took the lead in providing that information."

Officials with the Archdiocese of Chicago's Catholic schools told parents Wednesday that they determined COVID-19 case numbers in their schools and communities are low enough to

make masks optional, but they will still be required in schools where lawful local health department orders mandate them.

That means masks will be optional beginning Thursday at archdiocese schools in Lake County and most of suburban Cook County, but still required at schools in Chicago, Oak Park and Evanston, Superintendent Greg Richmond said.

Richmond said the school system currently has “no classrooms in quarantine anywhere in our archdiocese and we have no schools that have more than 3% of their students currently testing positive,” and “nearly half of our schools are reporting no cases at all.”

Archdiocese schools are complying with local health department orders that still require masking and “will lift the mask mandate when we can,” Richmond said.



Students and their families head home after school at St. Raymond School in Mount Prospect on Feb. 9, 2022. Masks will be optional beginning Thursday at the Archdiocese of Chicago's Catholic schools in Lake County and most of suburban Cook County. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

For Andrew Tourville, whose daughter is a kindergartner at Queen of Martyrs Catholic School in Evergreen Park, news of the archdiocese’s sudden change of heart on mandatory masking was bittersweet.

“My daughter will be able to be maskless tomorrow, but unfortunately, the children who go to school a half mile away in Chicago will still have to wear masks,” Tourville said.

While a growing number of public schools have shifted this week from mandatory masking to mask recommended or mask optional, the governor’s plans to lift the mandate for the general

public has prompted more parents to demand plans for a virus mitigation departure for their local schools.

“With steep declines in COVID-19 case counts in Cook County and ample access to vaccinations for children and adults, it is time for our local school district to reassess the policies put in place months ago,” said Chris Beer, a parent from Wilmette.

“Parents should have our rights to choose what we believe is safest for ourselves or our children,” Beer said.

Still, the mask optional movement [sweeping school districts this week](#) has been difficult for some parents, including Robyn Swanson, a mother of three from Arlington Heights. Swanson’s 13-year-old twin sons had liver transplants as toddlers and are immunocompromised, placing them at heightened risk of illness if they were to contract the virus.

“The school is being as helpful as they can be, and they sent an email out to the parents with students in my sons’ classes, letting them know that immunocompromised students are in the classroom, and encouraging them to mask, but they can’t make it a requirement,” Swanson said.

While many parents heeded the call to mask their children, several did not, leaving Swanson worried, and without options.

“The judge’s ruling was kind of murky and unclear to say the least, but many school districts choose the path of least litigation,” Swanson said.

Wednesday Journal of Oak Park and River Forest D97 hires Ushma Shah as next superintendent --- 2/9/2022

By Dan Haley



Ushma Shah

Oak Park's District 97 elementary schools have a new superintendent. Dr. Ushma Shah, one of two finalists for the post, was appointed Tuesday evening by school board.

Shah will start work in the district under a three-year contract beginning June 1 replacing two interim co-superintendents who have shared the district's leadership over the past year.

In enthusiastic remarks to the board and the community during a virtual meeting Tuesday, Shah said she was honored to be the new superintendent. "It has been great even in the little time I have been here to meet the staff and principals. There is a lot that I am excited about. I will be entering this role with my teacher's lens on."

Shah arrives from the Chicago Public Schools where she held a leadership position overseeing four departments within the central office. She also spent 10 years as assistant superintendent for elementary schools at the **Elgin Area U-46 district**. She began her 30-year career as an elementary and middle school teacher within CPS.

Jung Kim, president of the Oak Park school board said in a statement, "I am thrilled to announce Dr. Shah as our new leader." Kim heralded Shah's experience in creating diverse leadership teams and focusing on equity

"We believe her vision, values and student-centered approach make her an excellent fit for our community, and we look forward to working with her to advance the goals and priorities of the district," said Kim in the statement.

Pointing to the district's acorn logo, Shah said it resonated with her approach to gardening and growth. She asked board members "as homework" to consider how they would plant, trim and build trellises to support growth. "When you zoom out and look at the resources we have – time, people, money, technology – where do we need to plant, to trim or prune," what are places that need to be strengthened.

Shah, a native of India, arrived with her parents in Chicago's Austin neighborhood in the 1970s.

Shah, who currently serves as the Interim Chief Portfolio Officer in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), said she is excited for the opportunity to lead in a community with a demonstrated commitment to racial justice, equity and academic achievement for all.

"I am honored to serve as the next superintendent of District 97 and look forward to building on the strengths of the community," Shah said. "It is the integrated vision that Oak Park has for itself and the community's call to fully realize it that brings me here as a leader."

The statement from District 97 said that while Shah will begin full-time work on June 1 that she will work this spring with Dr. Griff Powell and Dr. Patricia Wernet, the interim co-superintendents to begin planning for the next school year.

The Nefarious TikTok Challenge

By Tony Sanders, Superintendent of School District U-46

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FrontLine

TONY V. SANDERS | SOCIAL MEDIA

The Nefarious TikTok Challenge

THE RISE OF THE TIKTOK CHALLENGES involving deviant student behavior has burdened school districts nationwide at a time when we continue to adapt to serving students during a global pandemic. It's another example of how educators have had to adapt quickly to the socially networked world.

I will never forget my first experience with a rapid notification system when I was a communications officer. In minutes, I could write, record and send phone and text messages to all families. The power to be the first to report incidents to families quickly waned with the 2007 introduction of the smartphone, which accelerated the use of Facebook and Twitter through the development of apps. Suddenly, on-the-ground reporting by students diminished our ability as school leaders to be the first to communicate.

The challenges that dared personal behavior to be captured on video and distributed began relatively harmlessly. There was the ice bucket challenge to support ALS funding (good) and the "cinnamon challenge" that encouraged individuals to eat a spoonful of dry cinnamon (bad). The launch of TikTok upped the ante.

Most recently, the "devious licks" TikTok challenge encouraged students to steal or vandalize school property, resulting in 80 soap dispensers being ripped from the walls of bathrooms at several of our district's schools. Our damage last September was minor compared to others, who suffered damages to light fixtures and mirrors and theft of smartboards and equipment.

Prevention Strategies

"Devious licks" quickly grew to a calendar of monthly challenges aimed at student conduct in schools, such as encouraging students to "smack a staff member on the backside." Even though TikTok denounced the trend, education leaders will need many tools to address the next nefarious challenge enabled by social media.

My suggested strategies are these:

► **Be a social media role model.**

What is your purpose for being on social media? I am on Facebook to connect mostly with parents and community members. I use Twitter as a way to connect with students. Having a social media connection with stu-

dents — with the appropriate boundaries — makes me accessible and allows me to serve as a role model for digital citizenship.

To encourage positive behaviors, last October I issued my own TikTok challenge to my student followers (of which there are many, judging from the feedback on snow days): October, bring a teacher a Starbucks; November, attend an after-school club; December, deck the halls by high-fiving someone you don't know; January, send the superintendent a snow day tweet; February, help a stranger; March, compliment your food server; April, try your best on state tests; May, volunteer to help at a school event; and June, bring a treat to front-office staff.

► **Connect with students.**

To create a positive culture, student voice must be valued. Use the connections with students to solicit feedback on how to combat any social media challenges that might cause harm to others.

I have student advisers from across our high schools. These students, along with our board of education's student adviser, hold an annual student summit where they discuss issues important to students. Principals and other administrators listen but do not talk. The genuine feedback helps to develop solutions, all student-driven, for improving the climate and culture of our schools.

► **Communicate broadly.**

Keep your teachers, staff and school resource officers aware of the challenges so they can help monitor student behavior and inform you if they become aware of the next challenge potentially bearing negative outcomes for students. Administrators should reassure their staff members that their safety and well-being are top priorities.

Remind students and their parents of your student code of conduct and possible consequences. Consider providing parents with informational sessions on how to monitor their child's online activity and help them become familiar with apps they may not use themselves.

As with any pressing issue, do not forget that you have colleagues to consult. Use your peer network to brainstorm solutions.

"Most recently, the 'devious licks' TikTok challenge encouraged students TO STEAL OR VANDALIZE school property ..."



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Daily Herald

Girls' Basketball: South Elgin cruises to win over Fenton --- 2/9/2022

By Bobby Narang, Daily Herald Correspondent

Fenton's historic girls' basketball season has included many memorable moments.

The Bison set a program record for most wins in a season, beating numerous quality opponents and showing they can win in the traditional sense since abandoning their previous style of chucking 3-pointers.

But Fenton's rise up the win column has hit one impassable roadblock -- **South Elgin**.

For the second time this season, South Elgin played the villain role in Fenton's season.

The Storm scored 20 points in the second quarter to cruise to a 67-35 win over the Bison on Wednesday in Bensenville.

On Jan 11, the Storm recorded a 80-43 victory to end Fenton's seven-game winning streak. In Wednesday's game, the Storm canned 9 3-pointers in a running-clock victory. Senior point guard Caroline Croft led the Storm with 16 points.

Junior guards Chloe Kmiec and Raina Yang each hit 3 3s and finished with 11 points each and Ella Winterhalder poured in 9 points to hand Fenton its first home loss of the season.

South Elgin coach Dan Mandernack said it was the second time in program history that the Storm (24-5, 18-0) won the Upstate Eight Conference, and the second time in five years.

"I've been telling everyone that we're the smallest Class 4A team in the state," he said. "We're all guards and anyone can play point guard for us, so we have to press and manufacture points. The kids are scrappy, fly around and are relentless. We used all three of our presses tonight. Fenton is a good team. They have two really nice tall players, but our press was the difference tonight. To go 18-0 in conference, that's an accomplishment. This team has a lot of heart."

Croft, a four-year varsity player, said the press was the spark for the Storm. Fenton turned the ball over 9 times in the first quarter.

"We started off slow, but got into a groove, especially on defense," Croft said. "We work well together and move the ball and fly around and hustle on defense."

Meanwhile, South Elgin moved a step closer to a 25-win season, building momentum for its Class 4A regional semifinal playoff opener against Elgin on Tuesday at 6 p.m. The Storm controlled the boards and feasted off Fenton's turnovers to win their sixth straight game -- all by double digits.

The Storm closed out the regular season by keeping their conference record unblemished in part by outscoring the Bison 20-3 in the second quarter. Fenton, which dressed eight players, led for the first four-plus minutes until Winterhalder's steal and layup handed South Elgin an 8-7 lead it would not relinquish the rest of the game.

"Our press is part of our identity," Winterhalder said. "Those steals give us momentum and translate into our offense. We're unselfish on offense."

The Bison (25-5, 14-4) came unhinged when the Storm slapped their full-court pressure defense early in the first quarter, falling victim to a flood of turnovers. The Storm cashed in by scoring points off several turnovers to build a 35-14 lead. Yang ended the second quarter by canning a 3-pointer from the corner at the buzzer.

The Bison, who play host St. Francis in a Class 3A regional semifinal on Monday, close out the regular season on Senior Night Thursday against Elmwood Park. Gracen Haska scored 15 points for the Bison.

"I have all the respect for South Elgin," Fenton coach Dave Mello said. "They're the real deal. As a pressing team, they give us more problems that you would expect. They fly all over the court. Every pass is contested. The pace of the first quarter was nice, but they had that second quarter run really blew it open. We had a lot of turnovers. Their ball movement was impressive. This is a good lesson for us."