

Health & Safety Steering Committee Meeting Notes - February 16, 2022

Read full meeting agenda and member list [here](#).

PUSD COVID Update:

- Outdoor mask requirement was lifted on February 7th. Many students and staff are still wearing them which is absolutely fine if it helps them feel safe.
- Vaccination requirement for students was lifted on January 27th. District stands at 98% vaccinated.
- There was one staff COVID case and nine students cases last week. Case totals will continue to be posted on the District website on a weekly basis. Testing continues as needed for students and staff.
- State indoor mask mandate expired on Feb. 15th. School mandate remains. The California Department of Public Health announced it will analyze conditions over the next two weeks and make an announcement regarding the indoor mask mandate for schools on Feb. 28th. Did not indicate what metrics it will be using. Left us with the same questions as before, only with a date when an announcement would be made.

Discussion Topics:

Indoor Masking - Discussion points and opinions shared included:

- Even if the state lifts the indoor mask mandate for schools, individual counties may still impose their own restrictions. No indication from Alameda County on where it stands. There is political pressure, as well as ongoing concerns over social/emotional health of students at work.
- Suggestion to wait until two weeks after Feb. 28th to lift indoor mandate to give possible infections over February Break a chance to settle down.
 - Impressions of many in the group are that the mandate would not be lifted on the 28th - just an announcement of a possible date in the future.
- Appreciates District's decision to align with state guidelines on outdoor masking and email to families that it would follow suit with state/county guidelines for indoor. Believe families are ready for this next step. Already seeing a difference in how younger students are behaving outdoors.
- There have been discussions among pediatricians regarding social/emotional health. Kids have lost caregivers, family members and haven't been able to see other relatives. So many reasons for social/emotional burdens. But one reason that does not come up is masking. Creating a perception that if you take the masks away, everyone feels better. What does go away is the mask reminding you of the pandemic, but it won't fix the other barriers that are out there. Can

actually have the opposite effect if it results in more infections in the community. Masking is not a solitary issue.

- Many pediatricians are appalled that these types of decisions are being left to the schools.
- Students have younger siblings at home. Hospitalization rates for children under 5 are the highest they've been since the start of the pandemic. For parents of children under 5 who are not vaccinated, it's scarier now than any other time during the pandemic. Infection can still be brought home. Masking was set as a baseline to keep everyone as safe as possible. The American Academy of Pediatrics and CDC have not changed their stance regarding masking. This new push is political and not data-driven and not helpful for our younger kids.
- Masks are not the single issue when it comes to students' mental health. It's a more chronic effect of everything being canceled or limited. Kids don't mind the masks. Just taking them off won't be the solution to all the challenges they're facing. Right now we feel comfortable with the possibility of taking off masks, but conversation must include the possibility of bringing them back if conditions change. We're not done. Things may be better right now, but may need to reassess.
- Do we have a sense how many kids (high school) are still wearing masks outdoors. If they're not eating, they seem to be leaving them on. It's just easier in between classes. Would that trend continue indoors?
 - Older students may be looking at it as not wanting to risk missing activities. Also think they're just used to it at this point and go about their business.
 - Would estimate 50% at my elementary school are still wearing them outdoors. Reason I'm given is that they live with younger siblings or older relatives.
- No one is ripping the masks off and saying it's over. What we're saying is masks will be optional. Mitigation measures can't be on all the time. They need to be used as a lever or else we're crying wolf all the time. These measures do have a cost. They're not the whole puzzle, but they are a piece. Thinking that masks are the norm is a problem. There's so much anxiety around it. We shouldn't always be asking students to sacrifice. We're always moving the goalposts when we have the tools to keep people safe.
- We are still seeing higher case rates than ever before. PUSD had more cases last week than they had in the fall. Ventilation matters a lot. One case in a classroom can affect an entire class. Hopeful that lifting the indoor mask requirement would come with other measures. Would need to be more prudent about testing, contact tracing and isolation.

- Community infection rate is higher than ever. We're re-defining what we think is acceptable based on politics rather than science. Started with 5/100,000 cases as our metric and now we're 10x that. Think we've made sound recommendations to the District based on science-driven information and will continue to do so in the best manner we can.

Off-Ramp? - Discussion points and opinions shared included:

- Where do we need to get to in order to treat COVID like the flu? We have constantly been reactive. What are we (PUSD) looking for? Would love to have levers to go back and forth. Never trying to downplay the severity of the pandemic, but need some hope. What will it take to change behavior/reaction? Ten cases a week would have generated a much different reaction in September. Now, not so much.
- Difference between then and now is we're mostly vaccinated, the virus is milder, better masks and therapeutics. There are more infections, but fewer are getting sick. The world is moving on and we need to adjust our thinking. No community is as vaccinated as ours. Let's show respect for the medicine, science and families' decisions.
- Seems like you are hearing most from families with younger children or immuno-compromised individuals. Good news is there are great therapeutics coming down the road. Vaccines for those under 5 would help as well. It's not completely negative but there are still some pieces missing.
- Vaccine for under 5 not really on the horizon right now. Kids are not eligible for a lot of therapeutics. Pediatric concerns are different from adult concerns. The overall trend is better. There will be another variant. Hopefully all will be vaccinated and we can manage it differently.
- Unfortunately, it will be the political will that determines when this is over. What we're worried about is that medically, COVID will not prove to be the same as the flu. The long-term effects seem to be much more serious at the organ function level. Not determined yet that it should be treated the same as the flu. More died of COVID in January than in all of a typical flu season.
- What support do we need to offer to help our community 'hold tight'? We're in planning mode for next year. What should we be doing differently?
- What we do in the schools ripple through other aspects of peoples' lives.
- Offer support to reduce anxiety. There will be highs and lows - it's the new normal. Even if you get sick, you will most likely be ok.
- Case rates are affected by people testing at home and not reporting the results. Schools are required to report, individuals are not. Case rates are underestimated as a result.

- Are there situations where we should do things differently than the state? It's important to prepare families for the possibility that we can go back to restrictions if conditions change. Balance it out by not deviating from state guidelines when they make sense for what our community is experiencing. Not detecting a lot of anxiety among children and their peers and I think appropriately so based on the treatments available and protection we have.
- Every call I get is about COVID. We want an off-ramp as well. The trajectory is better, but we're losing staff because they're done with it as well. We get it. We're not trying to create barriers.
- We are a community and have to take care of each other by working together.

Next meeting - Wednesday, March 23rd, 8:30am