

Massachusetts Education Commissioner To Make Mask Mandate Decision Next Week

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State House News Service

As COVID-19 case counts continue to rise across Massachusetts, including its schools, a decision about whether to extend the mask mandate in public schools will be announced next week, Education Commissioner Jeff Riley told local school officials.

A Department of Elementary and Secondary Education spokeswoman confirmed Thursday morning that Riley informed school superintendents of his plans during a phone call with them on Wednesday.

In October, Riley notified school districts he was extending the mask requirement in K-12 public schools through Jan. 15, citing consultations with medical experts and state health officials. Education Secretary James Peyser said the extension represented “another big step forward in our efforts to keep schools safe for our kids” and would allow more time for the elementary school students to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

Education officials say masking, testing and vaccinations have made school environments safe, and Riley had planned last month to make a call on whether to lift or extend the mask mandate but decided to wait.

“With the new arrival of omicron, it seems too soon to make a decision at this time,” Riley said Dec. 17. “The medical community’s asked for some additional time so that we have better facts on the ground. They’re learning a lot very quickly about the omicron variant. We’ll wait and see, and see what the situation looks like in early January for a

decision.”

Since then, COVID-19 case counts and hospitalizations have exploded across Massachusetts. Schools have stayed open for the most part, although districts coming out of the holiday break are seeing more virus-related absences that have sidelined students, teachers and the other support staff necessary to school functions.

In October, when Riley last extended the mask mandate, state education officials reported 1,804 COVID-19 cases among students during the week of Oct. 14 through Oct. 20, and 350 among staff. In the most recent report, covering the week of Dec. 16 through Dec. 22, 8,576 student cases were reported and 1,544 among staff.

The next report on student and staff infections is due out later Thursday.

In the face of rising infections and an updated mask advisory from state public health officials, education officials have stood by their rule that allows the mask mandate to be lifted, at the discretion of local officials, at middle and high schools with 80 percent of their students and staff vaccinated.

According to the most recent data available, state education officials have approved requests to lift the mask mandate from 31 schools, with seven other requests still processing.

The Department of Public Health on Dec. 21 issued an advisory that recommends, but does not require, all residents to wear masks in indoor public spaces. Massachusetts had varying forms of a mask mandate in place for much of the first year during the pandemic. DPH replaced the mandate with an advisory in May, about a month before Baker ended the COVID-19 state of emergency, and Baker has resisted calls to reinstitute a mask mandate.

“In response to the rise in cases and hospitalizations we are seeing in the Commonwealth and as we learn more about the emerging omicron variant, the Department of Public Health advises that all residents, regardless of vaccination status, wear a mask or face covering when indoors and not in their own home,” state Health and Human Service Secretary Marylou Sudders said last month when the advisory was reintroduced. “We particularly urge this recommendation if you have a weakened immune system or if you are at increased risk for severe disease because of your age or an underlying medical condition, or if someone in your household has a weakened immune system, is at increased risk for severe disease, or unvaccinated.”

The mask advisory was issued on the same day that Gov. Charlie Baker announced he was activating hundreds of Massachusetts National Guard personnel to assist overwhelmed health care providers and requiring hospitals to postpone or cancel non-essential elective procedures in order to preserve hospital bed capacity.

The mask advisory immediately generated calls for a mask mandate, and Baker on Dec. 21 defended the advisory in part by saying that people who have been both vaccinated and boosted against COVID-19 face an “extremely low” risk from the fast-spreading omicron variant.

School districts this year are required to provide in-person learning to all students. The school mask mandate includes exceptions for students who cannot wear a mask due to medical conditions or behavioral needs.

In August, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education gave Riley the authority, at his request, to mandate masks for all public K-12 students, educators, and staff through at least Oct. 1. So far, Riley has twice extended his initial mandate.