

NY to lift mask mandate in all schools Monday

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New York State Team | USA TODAY NETWORK

ALBANY — New York will no longer require students, teachers and staff to wear masks inside school buildings beginning Monday, reversing a policy that had been in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

In a letter Friday, state Health Commissioner Howard Zucker revealed he will alter the state’s mask requirements for schools to align them with summer camps, removing the mandate for the final days of

the academic year and for camps as they get set to begin.

Starting Monday, mask use in schools will be “strongly encouraged” by the state but no longer required – even if the student or teacher is not fully vaccinated, Zucker wrote in his letter to Rochelle Walensky, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“Indoors, mask use will be strongly encouraged but not required for students, campers, and staff/ teachers/counselors who are not fully vaccinated,” Zucker wrote. “Outdoors, masks are not required; students, campers, and staff/teachers/counselors who are not fully vaccinated are ‘encouraged’ to wear a mask in certain higher-risk circumstances.”

The state’s new guidance will allow individual school districts to set stricter standards, potentially setting up local battles over whether young, unvaccinated students should be required to cover their face.

The policy shift comes after New York officials last week announced kids in child care would not have to wear masks after the order received pushback from lawmakers, parents and care providers.

Andy Pallotta, president of the New York State United Teachers union, questioned why the state announced the new policy on a Friday with just three weeks to go in the school year, calling it “whiplash-inducing news.”

“Short of any additional guidance from the state or the CDC before Monday, we implore school districts to closely evaluate local conditions and connect with their educators and parents to decide the best course of action for protecting their school community,” he said in a statement.

Officials in New York and nationally have relaxed many pandemic restrictions recently amid declining coronavirus infections. New York state has reported the lowest COVID-19 test positivity rate in the U.S.

with similar risk levels and populations,” Zucker wrote.

Zucker also noted New York could reverse course and reimpose the mask mandate for schools if CDC officials could present any data or scientific evidence that contradicted the move to lift the mandate.

CDC officials did not immediately respond to questions Friday about the letter.

Since some K-12 schools began reopening for in-person classes in New York last fall, districts have reported a total of 137,582 COVID-19 infections, including about 99,400 cases among students, state data show.

Research has shown children are less susceptible to COVID-19. As of last month, more than 3.85 million children had tested positive in the U.S., representing 14% of total cumulative cases, according to data from the American Academy of Pediatrics. But the AAP report stated hospitalization and death are uncommon in children.

recently, with a seven-day average well below 1%, and down 93% from the winter surge peak in January.

On May 19, New York lifted its mask mandate to align with federal guidance, allowing those vaccinated against COVID- 19 to avoid wearing a face covering in most situations. But it left mask requirements in place for schools in part because COVID-19 vaccines are only approved for ages 12 and older.

New York’s move to break from federal guidance on schools Monday comes as parents nationally have struggled to weigh COVID-19 risks for younger children still ineligible for vaccines.

What Zucker’s letter to CDC says

Zucker’s letter on Friday questioned inconsistencies in the CDC guidance regarding mask wearing for children.

The current CDC guidance for K-12 schools recommends a requirement for consistent and correct use of well-fitting face masks with proper filtration by all students, teachers, and staff.

“There is no distinction between mask wearing for indoor versus outdoor activities (except for a vague reference to sports) and it does not address vaccinated individuals,” Zucker wrote in the letter.

In contrast, current CDC guidance for youth camps “strongly encourages mask use indoors for people who are not fully vaccinated.”

It also states that outdoors, people at youth camps “do not need to wear masks [irrespective of vaccination status],” Zucker wrote, adding CDC noted people who are not fully vaccinated are “encouraged” to wear a mask in certain higher-risk circumstances.

In addition, CDC guidance says “people who are fully vaccinated do not need to wear masks” both indoors and outdoors, the letter states.

“As we continue to work to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and balance reopening with safety, New York State strives for consistency across and between settings

State Senate Minority Leader Rob Ortt, R-North Tonawanda, Niagara County, issued a statement Friday declaring victory in the push to end many pandemic restrictions.

“Just yesterday, I called on Governor Cuomo to loosen the mask restrictions in our schools, particularly in light of the high temperatures we are expecting next week,” Ortt said.

“This is a decision that should have been in the hands of the local school districts long ago, but unfortunately there is still one person calling all the shots in Albany.”

USA TODAY contributed to this report.



Teacher Emily Shaw sets up a bulletin board in her transition classroom at Creekside School in Fairport on Sept. 9, 2020. The classroom has visual signs everywhere reminding students to wear a mask, and social distance. SHAWN DOWD/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

