



Grafton Public Schools

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February 20, 2022

To: School Committee Members

From: Jay Cummings

Re: Masking Recommendation

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education announced on February 9 that the state is lifting the masking mandate for Massachusetts schools on February 28, 2022. This announcement leaves individual districts responsible for deciding how to proceed with masking after the 28th. The Grafton School Committee has set up a special meeting on the 28th to discuss how it wishes to proceed with masking. The committee currently has two policies in place that are related to masking. One mandates that masks are worn by all students, staff, and visitors within the Grafton schools, and the other is related to unvaccinated staff being required to mask and test weekly. How the committee chooses to handle these existing policies will dictate masking status going forward in the Grafton Schools.

I recommend that the School Committee amend the current masking policy to transition to optional masking within the Grafton Public Schools.

The challenge of deciding when and how to pivot away from all students and staff's mandated masking is complex, messy, and strong feelings exist on both sides of the issue. Unfortunately, there is no clear metric that can be used for a community to utilize in deciding to move away from mandatory masking. Just as at the outset of the pandemic, there was no set metric for moving to the use of masks; the same holds true as we look to make masking optional. In the most basic sense, case numbers are now low. Most people are protected from significant illness due to vaccines and prior infection. We also provide the new state testing program to all staff and students who opt into the program.

If the School Committee votes to shift to optional masking, it will not be a perfect transition, and we will have to continue to problem solve and adapt as we have done for the past two years. One of my most significant concerns has been the health and safety of our most compromised and vulnerable students with significant health needs. I am confident that we will be able to work collaboratively between staff, students, and families to problem solve and adapt in ways that

maximize the provision of healthy environments for these students. We are currently exploring the possibility of staff working with these individuals to wear masks or participate in daily testing.

As superintendent, I am focused on what goes on in our schools; however, I'd be remiss not to note that mask-wearing in school is one small piece of the puzzle related to a child's overall health and wellness. As mask mandates are removed in other settings, the impact of masking in the school setting becomes significantly diminished. In my opinion, the possible slowing of transmission during school hours through mandatory masking (given that in most instances far fewer precautions are taken outside of school) is now outweighed by the negatives associated with mask-wearing (i.e connection with others, mental health, social-emotional needs, learning, etc.).

I recommend that the School Committee vote to amend existing masking policies to move the district to optional masking. I recommend that the transition to optional masking take place on Wednesday, March 2. This will give the district time to communicate the transition, talk to students about the respect for personal choice regarding masking, and communicate bussing protocols regarding the mandated use of masks while riding buses.

I would also ask that the superintendent be given the ability to institute mandatory masking if needed in the amended policy. This ability to impose mandated masking as needed would allow me to institute masking if we experience a spike in cases or if there are any concerns on the part of the Board of Health or the Department of Public Health.

Lastly, I would encourage unvaccinated individuals to continue masking and for all members of the community to get vaccinated.

- Jan

Appendix / Q&A

1. What are the most updated Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Protocols related to COVID?

Link to latest DESE protocols:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/12IPuoqufiJyLST2fTYFht7IDVMeYC1GO/view?usp=sharing>

2. What metrics are being considered in making the decision to go to optional masking?

In considering the recommendation to shift to optional masking, the guidance from DESE, BOH, MDPH and others is taken into account. This guidance is paired with case data and trends within the Grafton Public Schools and Worcester County. Lastly, vaccination rates within the Grafton Public Schools and Worcester County are also taken into account.

[Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Guidance](#)

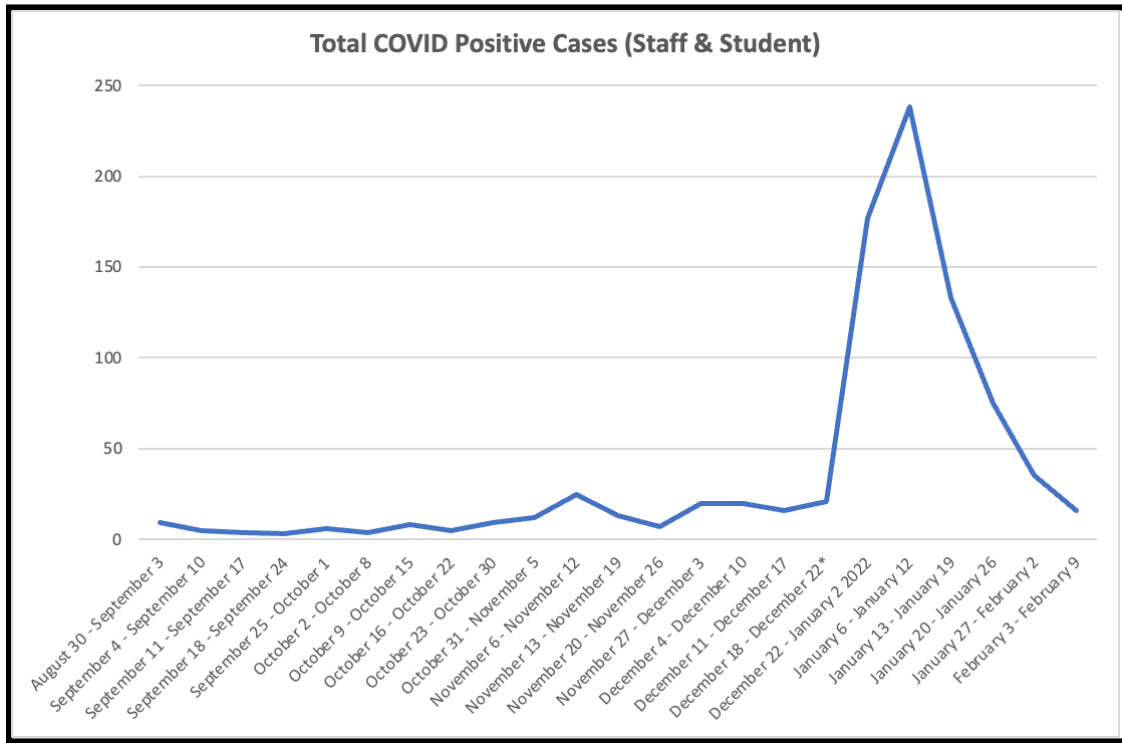
Local Board of Health - The Board of Health did not provide an independent recommendation to the school department. They did state that GPS falls under DESE guidance and that the alliance is in support of the new MDPH masking guidelines. If the Grafton schools move to optional masking we will continue to abide by the revised MDPH masking guidelines.

[Massachusetts Department of Public Health Recommendations and Guidance](#)

3. What metrics are considered to be most important in making decisions regarding masking?

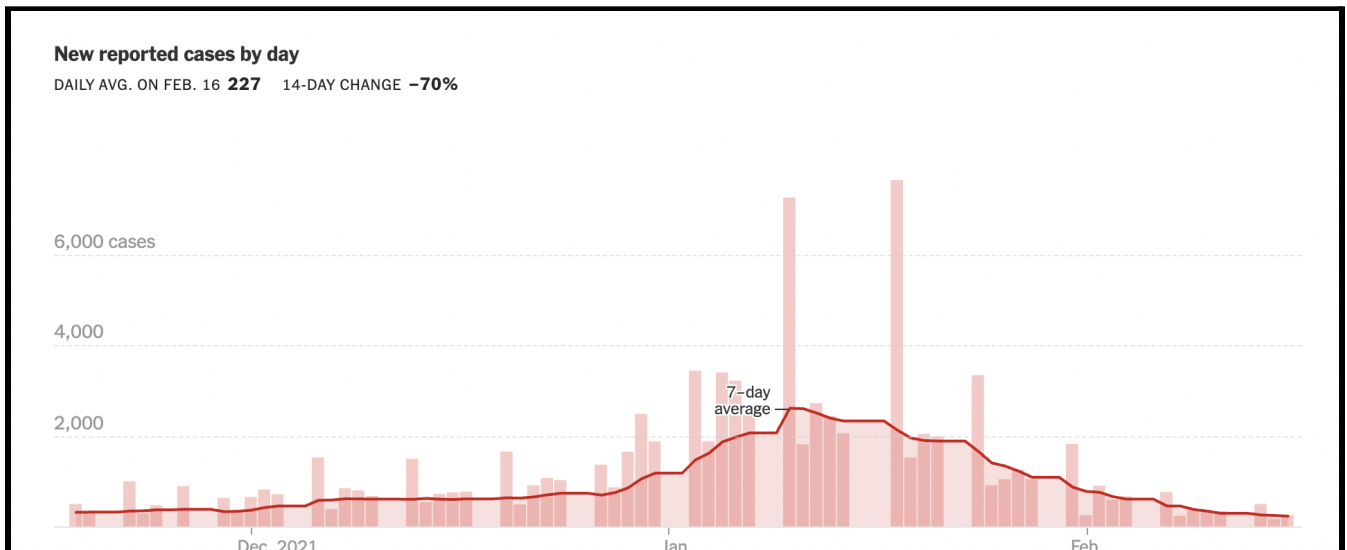
There are no universally accepted metrics as to when it is safe or appropriate to unmask. However, the two that are most often stated are a positivity rate less than 5% or an incidence rate of either less than 100 cases per hundred thousand over seven days or less than 50 cases per hundred thousand over seven days. As of the 2/17/22 report Grafton had a positivity rate of 3.11% with an incidence of 22. As a whole Worcester County had a positivity rate of 4.52% and a daily incidence of 37.9.

4. Case Numbers - Where do we stand in terms of positive COVID cases in the Grafton Public Schools (staff and students) now and how does that compare to the past six months?



5. Case Numbers - Where does Worcester County stand in terms of trends and positive COVID case numbers?

The chart below represents positive COVID cases in Worcester County. The chart is from the NYTimes.com website and was updated on February 17, 2022



6. Vaccination Rates - What is the most updated vaccination rate information among staff and students within the Grafton Public Schools?

Student Vaccination Rates as of 2-15-22

School	%
Grafton High School	81%
Grafton Middle School	78%
Millbury Street Elementary School	53%
North Street Elementary School	55%
North Grafton Elementary School	38%
South Grafton Elementary School	41%

Staff Vaccination Rates as of 2-15-22

School	%
Grafton High School	94%
Grafton Middle School	93%
Millbury Street Elementary School	92%
North Street Elementary School	90%
North Grafton Elementary School	90%
South Grafton Elementary School	96%
Total for District	93%

7. Vaccination Rates - What is the most updated vaccination rate information for Grafton residents?

As of February 18, 2022, 83% of Grafton residents have received one vaccine dose, 74% are fully vaccinated, and 44% have received a booster shot.

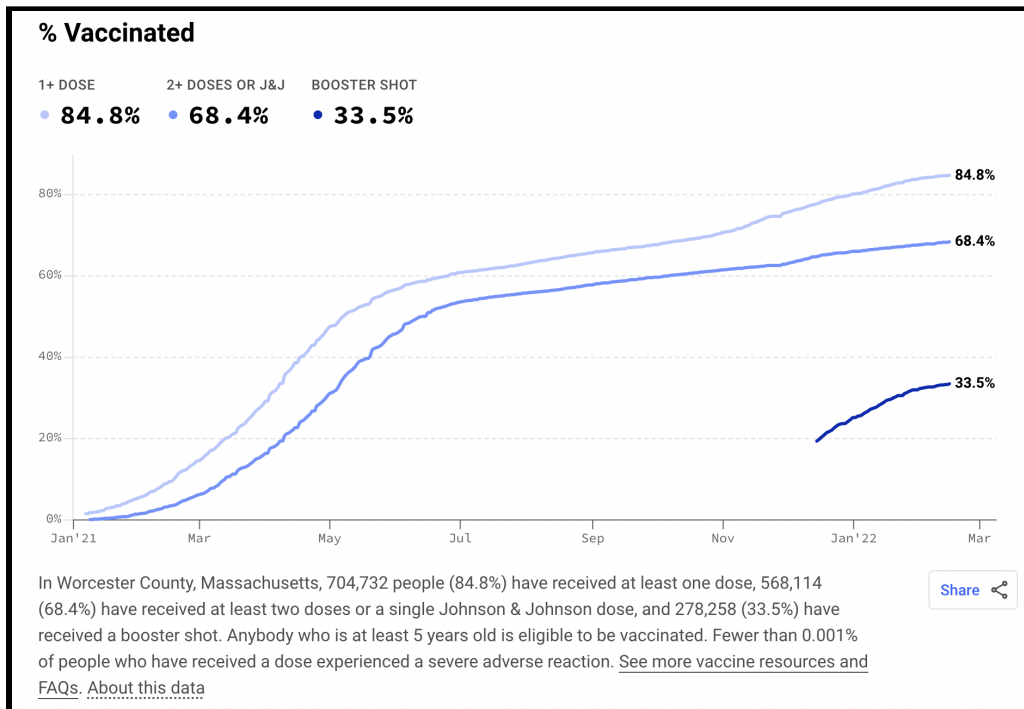
Our vaccination rate for all those over 12 years of age is quite good. We of course would love it to be even higher, but our school population for the high school is over 80% and for the middle school is just about 80%. Looking at data by age and not by school 80% of 12 to 15-year-olds are fully vaccinated, 88% of 16–19-year-olds are fully vaccinated and 52% of those 5 to 11 are fully vaccinated with 60% having received their first dose. When combined with the assumed number of children in that 5–11-year age range that who likely had recent infection and thus have some immunity the total number of children in the elementary school who are protected is quite high – especially considering that this is the age range that is least at risk for severe disease.

The full breakdown of Grafton vaccination data can be found here:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/19LtPCZXkeEGZjTmd2y27qAtlaDYizHjH/view?usp=sharing>

8. Vaccination Rates - What is the most updated vaccination rate information for Worcester County?

Of those eligible to receive vaccination (over five years of age), 84.8% of Worcester County residents have received one vaccine dose, 68.4% have received two doses, 33.5% have received a booster shot (data from covidactnow.org).



9. Where do we currently stand in terms of local hospital capacity?

We know that cases will continue to occur with this virus and that since many vaccinated people who test positive are asymptomatic or have mild infection, the total case number become less important. With that understanding, another important metric is hospital capacity. Our hospitals are no longer overwhelmed with patients admitted for Covid 19. Just under 90% of hospital beds in central Massachusetts are currently occupied with only a small percentage occupied with patients admitted for Covid 19. In addition, this occupancy rate is typical for this time of year prior to the pandemic.

10. Why is the state shifting to optional masking?

DESE cited consultation with medical experts, decreased cases, high rates of vaccination, and the provision of the new at-home testing program as the central reasons for the shift away from mandated masking.

11. Why don't we continue to mandate masking for the younger children in the district since the vaccination rates are lower for those students, and some are ineligible for vaccination?

Elementary-aged children are at lower risk for severe disease than teenagers. This is the age group most likely to have a sub-optimal educational experience with masking. Our current 1st graders have never been to school without a mask. Our current 2nd graders have barely been to school without a mask. All other elementary children have experienced a significant percentage of their education in masks.

According to a local doctor, the effectiveness of masks has been estimated to range anywhere from 10-50%. Most people seem to believe closer to 20% (no good data on the exact benefit exists). If case rates have dropped by a factor of 20 and even IF masks were 50% effective (which they are not), the risk of any infection from removing the mask mandate today is still far less than the risk with a mask mandate a month ago. There was a great explanation of this in Emily Oster's newsletter today [My School or Child Care Is Going Mask-Optional, and I'm Afraid](#) (substack.com)

The vaccines reduce but do not eliminate transmission, so we will not stop all transmission, even with a much higher vaccination rate. What we are doing is dramatically reducing severe disease. While children who have not been vaccinated are already at low risk for severe illness, children who have been vaccinated are at extremely low risk for severe disease. Any parent concerned about their own child can basically reduce their risk (even if they have a chronic medical condition) through mask-wearing to be no greater than other common respiratory illnesses that we have always had around us.

12. How will staff manage negative comments directed towards students who are wearing a mask?

I have abundant faith in our student body and believe that students will not share negative comments with one another regarding masking. If negative comments are shared, we will take a no-tolerance approach and address the issues directly, on an individualized basis.

13. If a student quarantines at home for five days, are they mandated to wear a mask for five days once they return to school?

Yes, per the most updated DESE protocols, students who have COVID are required to wear a mask upon their return from quarantine.

Protocol A: For individuals who test positive for COVID-19

Protocol A for individuals who test positive

- **Duration:** Self-isolation for COVID-19 positive cases is a minimum of 5 days after symptom onset or after positive PCR or antigen test, if asymptomatic.
- **Return to school:** After 5 days⁵ and once they have:
 - Been without fever for 24 hours (and without taking fever-reducing medications)
 - Experienced improvement in other symptoms.
 - Following the 5-day isolation period, individuals must mask for 5 additional days when around others, other than when eating, drinking, or outside.
- **Note:** Return to school should be based on time and symptom resolution. Testing during isolation to return to school is not required.

14. Will masks be required on buses?

Yes, masks are mandated to be worn on school buses per a federal order that remains in effect. Students must wear a mask while riding the bus.

15. How will mask-wearing be enforced on the buses?

This will undoubtedly be a challenge. We do not have bus monitors, and our bus drivers are fully occupied driving. We will address any masking issues on the buses as a behavioral issue. This means we will investigate individual issues by speaking with students. The driver, and utilizing video if necessary.

16. Who will be responsible for monitoring those whose family wants them to continue wearing a mask at school?

When we transition to optional masking, it will be up to the students to self-monitor their mask-wearing. It is not feasible for GPS staff to continuously manage awareness of parent desires regarding masking and student compliance with those wishes. We will do our very best to help promote adherence to family wishes with our young students and students with special needs.

17. What happens with unvaccinated staff if we go to optional masking?

If the decision is made to transition to optional masking, the school committee will need to consider the policy that is focused on staff vaccination. Our nursing staff currently tests a small percentage (under 3%) of unvaccinated staff weekly.

18. Does the state advise schools to contact trace again if masking is optional?

The state has discontinued all contact tracing and at this point, there is no plan to resume contact tracing in the future.

19. Are we still being advised to keep 3-6ft / social distancing?

No. DESE no longer requires any distancing between individuals.

20. Preschool-aged students are not eligible for a vaccine yet. Will preschool be included with K-12 if the district goes to optional masking?

Yes, preschool will be included in the PreK-12 move to optional masking.

21. How does our current reality compare to pre-COVID conditions in terms of the risk of severe illness?

According to local medical experts, the risk of severe disease resulting from being unmasked in school today, considering our current rates of disease in the community and the protection against severe disease due to vaccination, is similar to the risk of severe illness to other viruses that are common in children prior to the pandemic.

22. Will large gatherings be allowed in school (assemblies) and outside of school hours (sports, drama, music, etc.)?

Yes, we will allow for optional masking with large gatherings. However, we will be cautious in reintroducing the use of large gatherings and reserve the right to mandate masking if needed.

In school, we will continue to be judicious in using large-scale assemblies in the immediate future. Sports are now transitioning to outdoor for the spring season, so most games and meets will take place outside. Drama performances will tentatively be masking optional. If case numbers and BOH recommendations at the time of performances warrant a change for a particular event, we will make changes accordingly.