

PED updates COVID mask, testing guidance

Written by Staff Reports

Wednesday, 16 March 2022 10:52

SANTA FE – Parents have something to think about as the New Mexico Public Education Department has released a new toolkit that lays out new COVID-19 guidelines. The new guidelines allow schools to set their own face mask policies, so now parents will be able to make their own decisions for their children on whether or not they should go to school with a mask.

Along with the optional mask mandate, schools will also be able to accept easy, over-the-counter home tests in place of school-based testing programs.

The only remaining state-mandated mask requirement is for those returning to school from five days of self-isolation after testing positive: They must wear a mask for days six through 10.

“My colleagues and I are delighted that declining infection rates have allowed us to turn more decision-making over to the district and charter school leaders who know their communities best,” Public Education Secretary Kurt Steinhaus said. “We’ve waited a long time – working hard and learning as we went – to get to this point. My greatest hope is we can continue safely learning and teaching in-person.”

The new toolkit, dated March 10, lifts requirements that schools provide COVID testing programs for students, allowing instead results from a home antigen test along with a signed assurance for all testing purposes. Two rapid antigen tests taken 24-48 hours apart may be used to rule out COVID in symptomatic individuals.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham announced an end to the state’s mask mandate for indoor public places on Feb. 17, and a new public health order that day allowed school districts to set their own masking policies.

The new PED guidance also waives the requirement for schools to provide voluntary student testing programs to detect COVID-19 outbreaks as early as possible by screening asymptomatic individuals. They also may drop test-to-stay programs, which were initiated in

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November to keep exposed but asymptomatic students and staff in school. Those programs allow students and staff members to continue participating in classes and extracurricular activities if they remain asymptomatic and test negative on multiple COVID tests.

The latest update allows schools to expand test-to-stay to include community exposure in addition to school exposure.

Quarantine guidance is unchanged in the updated toolkit: If a school drops test-to-stay, an individual with a known exposure to COVID-19 would have to stay home for five days, and anyone testing positive must still self-isolate for five days.

Other changes in the updated toolkit include:

- Bell covers are no longer required for wind instruments.
- Unvaccinated individuals may share sleeping quarters with other unvaccinated individuals. However, PED and the Department of Health recommend that schools get consent from families before allowing students to share sleeping quarters, particularly for unvaccinated students.
- COVID-19 isolation rooms are no longer required. However, any student with a communicable illness (i.e. symptoms such as fever, cough, diarrhea, etc.) should be isolated from others.
- Non-essential visitors, assemblies and field trips are allowed.

The updates to the toolkit take effect immediately.

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