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Fairbanks schools to require face masks as COVID-19 cases climb

By
[Dan Bross, KUAC - Fairbanks](#)

-
September 9, 2021



North Pole High School (Fairbanks North Star Borough School District photo)

Everyone age 2 and up in Fairbanks school buildings must wear a face mask [starting on Monday](#).

The Fairbanks North Star Borough School District Board of Education voted 5-2 this week to require masking inside of schools. The policy applies to students, staff and visitors, and it replaces the district's optional masking rules it started the school year with.

The board's vote followed testimony from more than two dozen people, the vast majority in support of masking.

West Valley High senior John Herron DeLong described the current situation in schools as unsafe.

"A lot of people are in the halls walking around without masks on," he said. "And it's kind of scary to be just standing somewhere and then a group of five to eight people walk by you without masks, sometimes coughing. So it just feels like I'm in constant danger of becoming sick."

He said he's also concerned that he'll bring the virus home.

Fairbanks parent Jackie Morton told the board that current district mitigation measures aren't effective.

"One of my 6th grade twins has 28 children in her class. The other has 26," she said. "They sit four to a table. There is no social distancing."

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Morton also said she doesn't think COVID-19 testing in schools is working.

"Schools are running out of tests early. Or they run out completely," she said. "It's time to bring out some new tools. One of which is masking."

Others who testified characterized the district's approach as reactive instead of proactive. But a few like Kelly Nash took issue with requiring masks.

"We're going to lose a lot of students. We have people lined up and ready," she said. "They're going to be pulling their students out if this goes any further."

Arguments for freedom of choice were countered by sobering health data from Fairbanks Memorial Hospital pediatrician Dr. Mishelle Nace, who updated the board on local pandemic conditions. Nace pointed to record case and hospitalization numbers.

"From the pediatric standpoint, we have had more patients the past month with COVID-19 admitted to the hospital than we have any time in the total previous 14 months of the pandemic," she said.

RELATED: [Mass testing can keep COVID out of schools. But none of Alaska's largest districts are doing it.](#)

Nace said Fairbanks does not have a pediatric intensive care unit and some kids fighting the coronavirus have had to be flown to Anchorage for treatment. She said masking, social distancing and vaccination remain key elements of a layered approach to slow the spread of the virus.

As of Thursday, the Fairbanks school district [reported](#) 314 student and 54 staff COVID-19 cases since school started a month ago, with the weekly case rate rising. Acting Superintendent Karen Melin told the board that the district is also seeing a lot of absences.

"At some of our schools, as much as one-third of the student population is absent," she said.

Melin said the more than 2,000 daily absences are significantly higher than previous years, but noted all may not be related to COVID-19, as an ongoing busing shortage could also be contributing to kids missing school.

The commanders of Eielson Air Force Base and Ft. Wainwright sent a letter to the board requesting a district-wide mask mandate. Post board representative, Ft. Wainwright commander Col. Nathan Surrey emphasized that school coronavirus cases and close contact absences impact base operations too.

"All the military parents that have to stay home with their kids, between 10 and 14 days depending on which base it is, it's a huge impact to us," he said.

School board vice president Jennifer Luke said masking is the simplest thing that can be done to reduce COVID-19 spread among students and school staff.

"The possibility of a school or an entire classroom shutting down is not an acceptable thing for me and for this community," she said. "We need to ensure that we have our students in our schools."

Board member Matthew Sampson countered that based on the number of people he sees wearing masks in public, the community doesn't want their kids forced to be forced to mask up.

"There's not 51% of people wearing masks," he said. "There's not 50%, there's not 30, there's not 25, there's not 15. Be lucky to have 10."

Sampson, and fellow board members Maggie Matheson and April Smith spoke against requiring masking in schools. Seeing how the votes were coming down, Sampson actually voted for the mask mandate, hoping to defeat it on a reconsideration vote, but the tactic failed.

The school board will revisit the mask requirement for the second semester at a Dec. 7 meeting.

Currently, the Anchorage School District requires face masks in its school buildings. But the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District and Kenai Peninsula Borough School District do not have a district-wide mask requirement.

RELATED: [Majority of Alaska students will start the school year under universal mask policies](#)



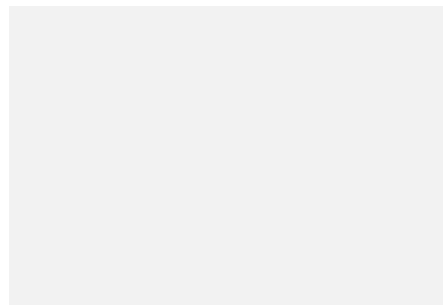
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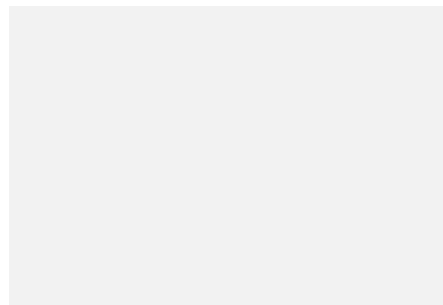
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Dan Bross is a reporter at [KUAC](#) in Fairbanks.

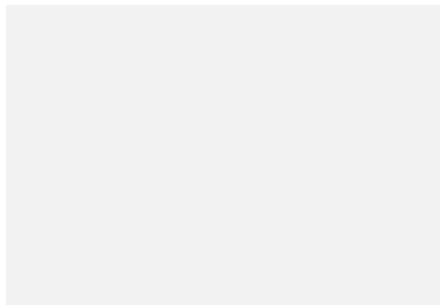
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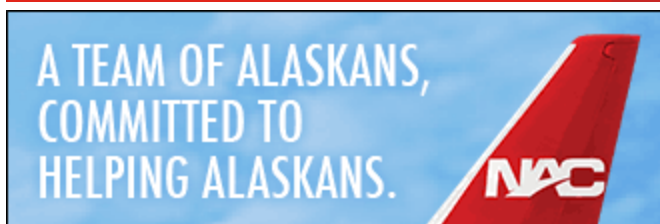
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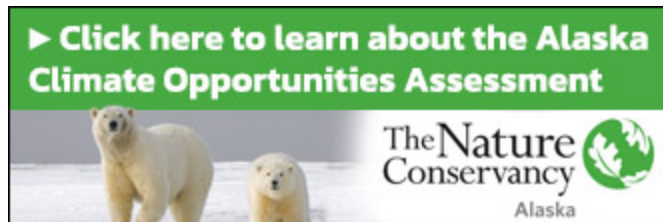





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