*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

### 75 Pleasant Street, Malden, Massachusetts 02148-4906 Telephone: (781) 338-3000 TTY: N.E.T. Relay 1-800-439-2370

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| Jeffrey C. Riley  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:** | January 14, 2022 |
| **Subject:** | Update on COVID-19 Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families |

Since our meeting on December 17, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department or DESE) has continued to inform districts of new developments related to COVID-19 and to support schools and districts as they navigate teaching and learning during the pandemic.

On December 22, Commissioner Riley announced that KN95 masks would be available to all schools and districts through DESE and the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) at nine regional sites. The masks – enough for one a day for each school staff member for six weeks – were distributed during the last week in December. The use of the KN95 masks is voluntary, and school staff’s choice of masks is ultimately a personal decision. We initially thought that all of the masks distributed had been tested by MIT, but on January 5, we received an update from MEMA that some of the masks in the distribution, those marked “non-medical,” had not been tested at MIT. Afterward, MEMA engaged MIT to test the non-medical masks. On January 14, we received the results and shared them with district leaders: According to the MIT testing, the KN95 masks in the shipments that were labeled “non-medical” had a filtration efficiency rate of over 98 percent.

On December 29, DESE informed superintendents that it would provide at-home rapid antigen tests for all school staff. The Department originally planned to provide two tests (one test kit) per staff member and distribute the tests on December 31 and January 1. However, based on supply chain availability, DESE’s original test order was delayed, and DESE worked quickly to find an alternative supply. The replacement shipment allowed for one test for each teacher and staff member. The Department distributed more than 227,000 rapid antigen tests to school districts on January 1 and 2.

On December 30, DESE issued updated DESE/DPH Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios. The updated protocols include a reduction of the required isolation period for COVID-19 positive individuals in K-12 schools from 10 to 5 days, reflecting guidance from the Centers from Disease Control and Prevention. In conjunction with the new protocols, DESE noted that the guidance does not recommend repeat testing of COVID-positive individuals before they return to school after the five-day isolation period, so long as they are asymptomatic or their symptoms are improving. Such individuals must wear a mask around other people for an additional five days after the isolation period.

To make it easier for districts to understand and implement the protocols, DESE released updated flowcharts on January 5.

On January 6, DESE issued a new FAQ that addresses the updated protocols, affirms that people returning from quarantine and isolation can remove their masks to eat meals, and states that “fully vaccinated” is still defined as two weeks following the completion of the Pfizer or Moderna series or two weeks following a single dose of Johnson & Johnson’s Janssen vaccine.

On January 10, consistent with the authority that the Board provided me on August 24, 2021 and after consulting with medical experts and state health officials, I extended the mask requirement

through February 28, 2022. The Department will continue to work with medical experts and state health officials to evaluate the mask requirement beyond February 28. The 80 percent threshold policy remains in effect. Whether or not a school or district avails itself of the 80 percent vaccination off-ramp is a local decision to be made by school and district leaders in consultation with local health officials. In alignment with statewide guidance, it is highly recommended that unvaccinated students and staff continue wearing masks.

The Department continues to hold webinars and release additional resources on [COVID-19 testing](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/testing/default.html) and other matters. As always, the DESE Rapid Respond COVID-19 Help Center remains open and available for consultation with districts and schools. Center staff have been working closely with districts to keep schools open and to keep students learning in person.

Attachments:

* [DESE/DPH Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios — SY 2021-22](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/protocols/) — Updated December 30, 2021
* [Flowcharts for COVID-19 Protocols](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/flowcharts.pdf) — Updated January 5, 2022
* [COVID-19 Updates in the Commissioner’s Weekly Update](https://mailchi.mp/doe.mass.edu/commissioners-weekly-update-1-3-22-covid-19-updates-leveraging-technology-upcoming-learnlaunch-workshops-96612#covidupdates) – January 3, 2022
* [January 6, 2022 Installment of FAQs (about updated protocols, masking at lunch, and the definition of fully vaccinated)](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/faq/2022-0106faq-installment.docx) *(download)*
* [Extension of DESE Mask Requirement](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/2022-0110mask-requirement-extension.pdf) – January 10, 2022
* [DESE Policy on Vaccination Rate Threshold](https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/vaccination-attestation-form.pdf) - September 27, 2021; Updated January 10, 2022 *(download)*

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