

Governors in 4 States Plan to Lift School Mask Mandates

The governors of four states announced plans Monday to lift statewide mask requirements in schools by the end of February or March, citing the rapid easing of COVID-19's omicron surge.

The decisions in Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey and Oregon were announced as state and local governments grapple with which virus restrictions to jettison and which ones to keep in place. The changes also come amid a growing sense that the virus is never going to go away and Americans need to find a way to coexist with it.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy called the move "a huge step back to normalcy for our kids" and said individual school districts will be free to continue requiring masks after the state mandate ends Mar. 7.

Meanwhile, California announced plans to end its indoor masking requirement for vaccinated people next week, but masks will still be the rule for schoolchildren in the nation's most populous state.

The four states are among a dozen with mask mandates in schools, according to the nonpartisan National Academy for State Health Policy. New Jersey's requirement has been in place since classes resumed in person in September 2020.

Murphy cited the "dramatic decline in our COVID numbers" in announcing the rollback. The omicron variant fueled a spike in infections over the holidays, but cases in the state are down 50% and hospitalizations dropped off by one-third since last week, he said.

"We are not—and I've said this many times—going to manage COVID to zero," the governor said. "We have to learn how to

live with COVID as we move from a pandemic to an endemic phase of this virus.”

Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont recommended ending the statewide mandate in schools and child care centers on Feb. 28. Delaware Gov. John Carney said his state’s school mask mandate will run through March.

Oregon’s mask requirements for schools will be lifted March 31. The statewide mask requirement for indoor public places will be lifted no later than the end of March, health officials announced.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state medical officer and epidemiologist, said education and health officials will meet in the coming weeks to revise guidance to “ensure schools can continue operating safely and keep students in class” once the mask rule is lifted.

The March 31 deadline was selected using predictions by health scientists that COVID-19-related hospitalizations will decrease to 400 or fewer by that time—a level that Oregon experienced before the omicron variant surge.

In California, unvaccinated people will still be required to be masked indoors after Feb. 15, and everyone will have to wear masks in higher-risk areas such as public transit and nursing homes and other congregate living facilities, state officials said. Local governments can continue their own indoor masking requirements. {eoa}

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