

## **Wearing Masks and Face Coverings During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

### **Mandated Wearing of Face Coverings**

The Board of Education is committed to ensuring the safety of New Milford Public School students, staff and community members during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cloth face coverings (including masks) are meant to protect other people in case the wearer is unknowingly infected, as many people carry COVID-19 but do not have symptoms. Face coverings are essential in times when physical distancing is difficult. The Board recognizes that face coverings may be challenging for students (especially younger students) and staff members to wear in all-day settings such as a school. Nevertheless, unless meeting one of the exceptions listed below, all students and school personnel must always wear a face mask (or other cloth material covering both the mouth and nose) while on school property or a school bus. This requirement also applies to parents dropping off or picking up children or any other visitor to the school facilities. Information should be provided to staff and students on the proper use, removal, and washing (and/or disposal) of cloth face coverings, which is available from the Centers for Disease Control (“CDC”). <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html>.

District schools will provide 1) masks to students and staff members who do not have one, and 2) appropriate and safe receptacles for the disposal of masks, coverings and other personal protective equipment. All masks and face cloth coverings must cover both the mouth and nose and comply with state and federal guidance (and school policies) covering dress/attire.

### **Exemptions**

The following individuals are exempt from mandated wearing of face coverings per CDC and state guidelines:

- 1) Anyone who has trouble breathing, or anyone who is unconscious, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance;
- 2) Anyone who has a medical condition making it unsafe to wear a mask, in accordance with SDE guidance;
- 3) Children under the age of two;
- 4) To the extent that a student or an employee may be eating or drinking in places where such activity is permitted by the District, provided that appropriate social distancing can be maintained, and masks are removed for only as long as necessary to eat or drink;
- 5) As may be appropriate, and as permitted by law, students with disabilities and who cannot wear a mask safely or continuously, with the District considering alternatives (for example, extra distancing, extra protective equipment) to protect staff and students;
- 6) Continuous wearing of masks or face coverings is not required in outdoor spaces where employees or students are not within six feet of any other person; and/or

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- 7) Educators while teaching may remove masks if properly distancing (beyond six feet) or remaining static behind a physical barrier at their desk (e.g., plexiglass), to the extent removal of the mask is necessary for the effective delivery of the specific instruction being given.

### **Mask Breaks**

The District's schools shall provide for and schedule age appropriate and safe mask breaks consistent with health and safety guidelines, and only where appropriate social distancing can be maintained. Such mask breaks may include: 1) outdoor breaks, 2) breaks in large rooms, and 3) breaks in classrooms where appropriate social distancing can be maintained. With respect to indoor mask breaks, students and/or staff should always stay six feet or more apart in well-ventilated areas and everyone should face in the same direction. During these breaks, students may talk (where permitted by the teacher); however, students must avoid loud talking, yelling, or singing. Generally, such mask breaks should be no more than 15 minutes.

### **Medical Exemptions**

Unlike the guidance in effect for the public at large, the exemption for wearing a mask in the schools due to a medical condition is limited. Current SDE guidance provides that medical contraindications to the wearing of masks are generally limited to individuals suffering from severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease ("COPD") such as might be seen with cystic fibrosis, severe emphysema, heart failure, or significant facial burns that would cause extreme pain or interfere with the healing of a skin graft. Indeed, the SDE strongly recommends that anyone suffering from any of the above-mentioned underlying conditions should remain at home and that students suffering from such severe health conditions should engage in full virtual learning due to their risk of developing severe complications if they become infected with COVID-19.

In accordance with current guidance, mild or intermittent respiratory or other common conditions such as asthma, cardiovascular diseases, kidney disease, or other similar conditions are generally not considered contraindications to the wearing of face coverings and will not justify an exemption from the mask mandate. However, if the work of breathing through a mask creates a significant health risk for a student or if psychological responses to a mask, such as claustrophobia, cannot be accommodated by trying different mask types (for example, a different cloth or a bandana), then the mask could be considered contraindicated and the student may be excused from wearing a mask.

A parent/guardian of a student who believes that their child is unable to safely wear a mask or cloth face covering because of a medical condition as described above should notify the School Nurse. An employee who believes that they are unable to safely wear a mask or covering because of a medical condition should notify Human Resources. The District will require documentation supporting a request for an exemption from the mask/face covering requirement, in accordance

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with applicable state and federal guidelines<sup>1</sup>. However, the District may rely upon supporting documentation in a student's existing school medical records. All medical information received by the District will be kept confidential as required by law and duly considered.

### **Special Education and Section 504 Students**

The District understands that it is possible that students with disabilities may not be able to tolerate or comply well with directives to wear a mask or face covering at school. The District will assess, on an individualized basis, the appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities who are unable to wear a mask, especially recognizing that students and staff involved with certain special education activities (e.g., speech therapy or where lip reading is required) may need to be exempted from wearing a mask intermittently. In cases where an exception is requested based upon a disability, a Planning and Placement Team or Section 504 meeting may be held to consider possible programming revisions or appropriate accommodations.

Generally, the fact that a student with a disability may be unable to consistently wear a mask in school is not a basis for their exclusion from school. In cases where close contact between educators and students is highly likely (such as when interacting with students with disabilities who may not be able to wear mask and/or cannot adequately socially distance), the District will provide educators with masks and face shields, and, as may be necessary, medical grade masks and disposable gowns. In addition, the District may use other mitigation strategies such as maximizing distancing, moving activities outdoors or to a well-ventilated space, and/or the use of other physical barriers in order to protect students and staff.

Students who do not wear a mask and who do not qualify for an exemption will be refused admission into District schools (and may instead be eligible for distance learning opportunities). In addition, the District reserves the right to take disciplinary action against those persons (whether students or staff) who violate the terms of this policy.

### **Preschool Students and Programs**

In addition to the exceptions listed above, preschool students who are newly enrolled in the District's preschool program(s) within the past two months and who are working toward mask wearing are permitted to remove their masks or face coverings. Furthermore, children who have just turned three years old may have up to two months to acclimate to wearing a mask or face covering.

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<sup>1</sup> Currently, a person seeking to be excused from the mask or face covering requirement because of a medical condition must provide written documentation that the person is qualified for the exemption from a licensed medical provider, the Department of Developmental Services or other state agency that provides or supports services for people with emotional, intellectual or physical disabilities, or a person authorized by any such agency. *Executive Order 7NNN (8/14/20)*.

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The District will work with such students and their parents, as may be appropriate, on developmental readiness and transitioning to wearing a mask or face covering, using age appropriate strategies (including training, social stories, positive reinforcements, and frequent/gentle reminders) and addressing tactile and sensory issues. Wherever possible, the District will seek to avoid excluding preschool students who do not wear masks as required by this policy, but the District will instead seek alternative strategies toward increasing compliance and in addressing the concerns of such students and their parents.

In addition to those exceptions listed above for all students (for example, during times when they are eating or drinking), preschool students are not required to wear a mask when resting or during outdoor activities. During times when a student is not wearing a mask, it is paramount that distance between students must be maximized, maintaining at least six feet of distance wherever possible. For preschool programs, the maximum group size in any one space is sixteen children.

### Legal References:

Executive Order 7NNN – Protection of Public Health and Safety During COVID-19 Pandemic – Masks and Face Coverings, August 14, 2020.

Connecticut State Department of Education, Adapt, Advance, Achieve: Connecticut’s Plan to Learn and Grow Together, September 4, 2020.

Connecticut State Department of Education, Addendum 11 to Connecticut State Department of Education Adapt, Advance, Achieve, Reopening Guidance “Interim Guidance for the Use of Face Coverings in Schools during COVID-19,” August 31, 2020.

Connecticut State Department of Education, Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Reopening K-12 Public Schools, Volume 3, September 2, 2020.

Letter from Dr. Miguel A. Cardona, Connecticut Commissioner of Education, to Superintendents of Schools with Preschool Classrooms, September 17, 2020.

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NEW MILFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
New Milford, Connecticut