

# Oxford School District announces mask optional policy for its schools

By Hayden Walker

editor-in-chief

On October 15, the Oxford School District announced that its schools would recommend, but not require masks beginning on October 18.

OSD and its mask mandate have had a rocky relationship since the beginning of the 2021-22 school year. In July, OSD announced that there would be no mask requirement when school began. As COVID-19 cases skyrocketed in Mississippi, however, the decision was quickly reversed. The Board of Directors continued to extend the mask mandate for three-week periods until they unanimously voted to enact a mask-optional policy on Oct. 15.

For Oxford High School Principal Noah Hamilton, this announcement was not a surprise.

“Honestly, with the way the numbers were declining and getting to a much lower rate, I felt like that was going to be the direction that we were going,” Hamilton said. “I think everybody has done a pretty good job of being as safe as you can be in this environment, and we haven’t had a whole lot of outbreaks since the first few weeks of the school year. Everything’s kind of laid back out, so I did feel like [the decision] was probably coming before November.”

Since the 2020-21 school year, the Oxford School District has outlined their COVID-19 policy in the “Return to Learn” plan. Superintendent Bradley Roberson believes that the data surrounding COVID-19 in Mississippi indicate that it is safe for the mask mandate to be lifted.

“The metrics [we look at] focus on local transmission rates within Lafayette county and transmission rates within the Oxford schools. So, we’ve just been monitoring them,” Roberson said. “We were hoping that we would get to this point, but we certainly weren’t sure. I was hopeful that if we saw a decline in the metrics we would be able to remove the mandate.”

According to Roberson, the transition away from a mask mandate does not affect OSD’s “Return to Learn” plan, and officials will stay on high alert.

“It’s very important that we remain cautious because there are still cases of COVID that are around,” Roberson said. “So we did keep a lot of those things in place. The majority of our ‘Return to Learn’ plan remained intact.”

Requiring masks has been a point of contention since the pandemic began, and parents have been quick to make their opinions known. Roberson believes that the best way to tackle opposing viewpoints is to stick to the plan.

“I’ve received a few emails on both sides of the argument: parents that were disappointed and frustrated that the mask mandate was lifted, and parents who were thankful that the mandate was lifted,” Roberson said. “That’s been the most difficult part of this, from the onset, because there is such a vast difference of opinions when you’re dealing with the pandemic and how best to deal with it. When you have something that’s so polarizing that we’re still going through to some extent, it’s really hard as a leader. You have to stick to what we outlined in the ‘Return to Learn’ plan and try to make the best decision possible.”

Hamilton sees the mask-optional policy as beneficial for members of the Oxford School District on both sides of the aisle.

“Everybody has an opinion,” Hamilton said. “Some are for it and others are against it. That’s

just kind of the way things are. The way it is now with the option, it gives everybody the flexibility to be who they are. So, if they feel like they need to wear a mask, then it gives them that flexibility to do that and be just as safe. Whereas if the parent allows their student not to wear a mask, then they’re comfortable as well.”

Roberson has been in communication with other school district leaders to discuss pandemic policy.

“We have a network of superintendents, and we speak regularly throughout the pandemic because we’re all facing the same challenges and dealing with the same issues,” Roberson said. “And it’s issues that we’ve never encountered before in the field of education. Depending on your local community, that really determines how your stakehold-

regulations, but she feels that the new policy will be largely harmless to students at OHS. However, she believes it may pose a threat to younger students.

“I take care of my elderly parents who are immunocompromised, so I’ve been incredibly cautious,” Husbands said. “In terms of the mask mandate, I’m not concerned for myself. I’m concerned for not even as much as you guys at the high school as I am for my friends who have small children in the elementary schools. They can’t get their children vaccinated yet and they’re very nervous. That makes me very nervous for them, especially with the severity of the Delta variant in children. That has concerned me probably more than anything else. I feel pretty comfortable here, especially because I think that the majority of my kids are vaccinated.”

Husbands has observed a shift in her students’ behavior since the mandate was lifted. However, the most jarring change has been seeing students’ full faces.

“My students talk more because they can understand each other better,” Husbands said. “It is weird to see their faces. Mostly with sophomores, because I don’t know them from before. So when the mask comes down, I’m like ‘that is not what you look like.’”

Roberson sees the lifting of the mask mandate as a step in fulfilling the mission of the “Return to Learn” plan.

“One of our goals in our ‘Return to Learn’ plan was to get back to normal school operations as soon as we could,” Roberson said. “We feel like this is a step in getting back towards normal school operation because we know that system works. I would say that this is a step back towards normalcy, to where we were pre-pandemic.”

Hamilton believes that there is no returning to how education functioned before the pandemic, but agrees that the new mask-optional policy is a move towards that objective.

“I think it’s just one more step moving into a more normal direction,” Hamilton said. “Will we ever be what we knew before the pandemic? I don’t know, but it gets us a step closer. I think it’s strongly beneficial.”

## MARCH 12, 2020

OSD announces that schools will be closed on March 16-17, the first two days after spring break.

## MARCH 19, 2020

Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves signs an executive order closing schools until April 17.

## APRIL 14, 2020

Governor Reeves closes all schools for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.

## JUNE 6, 2020

OSD announces its “Return to Learn” plan for the 2020-21 school year, marking the return of in-person instruction with COVID precautions including a mask mandate and social distancing.

## JULY 27, 2021

The OSD Board of Trustees voted 4-1 to recommend, but not require masks for the 2021-22 school year.

## JULY 31, 2021

Superintendent Roberson announced that OSD would reinstate its mask mandate through Aug. 20. This policy was renewed at every subsequent board meeting until Oct. 15.

## OCTOBER 15, 2021

By a unanimous vote, the OSD Board of Trustees approved a mask-optional policy for all schools.

ers feel and how the superintendents feel as well. But, our main focus is that we have to figure out how to educate kids while keeping them safe. That’s why we made the decisions we made in the Oxford School District. We thought, with the low transmission rate, it was time to maybe shift the focus more towards the priority of educating kids.”

English teacher Sommer Husbands has noticed that many students were hesitant to take off their masks directly after the announcement but quickly acclimated as the first week went on.

“On day one, I’d say half of my kids remained masked. But by the end of this week, I might have three,” Husbands said.

Husbands has been wary of looser pandemic

