

## COVID safety in our schools

# Talking with members about NJEA's position on masking, testing and vaccination

NJEA's top priority in this situation is to protect the health and safety of our students and members while providing the best possible education.

- We have consistently called for all necessary measures to make our schools safer, from building upgrades to specific COVID-prevention strategies
- Current CDC guidance recognizes that students benefit from in-person learning, and a safe return to in-person instruction this fall.
- Masking, vaccination and regular testing all serve to make schools safer and to help ensure a more consistent, less disrupted school year.
- At least half of New Jersey's students are not yet eligible to be vaccinated.
- We have an obligation to protect our students to the greatest extent possible
- Public health experts say that mask wearing by both vaccinated and unvaccinated people helps keep those students – and all unvaccinated people – safer

NJEA believes that we need to follow the guidance of public health experts when it comes to safety issues like masking, vaccination and testing.

- The overwhelming consensus of public health experts – including the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics – is that universal masking by all students age 2 and older, staff, teachers, and visitors to K-12 schools, regardless of vaccination status is necessary in public schools for the safety of everyone.
- The overwhelming evidence is that COVID vaccines are very safe and highly effective and are the best tool we have to slow and stop the spread of COVID.

- In combination with universal masking and widespread vaccination of eligible individuals, regular testing also helps make schools safer by identifying positive cases and reducing the chance for additional infections and large outbreaks.
- While people have differences of opinion on many COVID issues, there is clear scientific consensus among public health agencies on the importance and effectiveness of masking, vaccination and testing.

This is undeniably a difficult way to begin the school year

- The best way to move past this current COVID surge is to wear masks when required and to promote vaccination for all eligible individuals.

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### Current New Jersey COVID safety requirements in schools:

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- **Masking:** New Jersey requires all individuals in school buildings to be masked, with certain very limited exceptions. This is not optional or at the discretion of students or staff.
- **Vaccination:** New Jersey does not currently have any statewide absolute COVID vaccination mandate for school employees. However, New Jersey does require employees in certain key industries, including healthcare and education, to be vaccinated OR to undergo regular COVID testing.
  - **NOTE:** Some employers may choose to implement stricter vaccination requirements. Those will be examined case-by-case to ensure

that they are legal and are implemented in accordance with the collective bargaining agreement.

- **Testing:** School employees who are not yet vaccinated are required by the state to undergo regular COVID testing to help identify cases and prevent additional transmission.

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### Representation issues:

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- Both local district employers and the State of New Jersey have the legal right to mandate measures to keep schools safe, including by requiring masking in schools or requiring vaccination or regular testing of employees.
- NJEA will defend the legal and due-process rights of members who face discipline or other adverse job consequences
- Members should understand that there is no universal right for employees to refuse to abide by mandatory safety measures.
- Gov. Murphy's masking order contains certain limited exceptions for some activities and for some individuals with demonstrated medical needs.
- Any member who believes they have a legal right to a medical exemption should contact their UniServ field rep to discuss that matter
- Any parent who believes their child has a legal right to a medical exemption should contact the school district directly
- Gov. Murphy's executive order regarding vaccination or regular testing for school employees provides an option for those who remain unvaccinated.
- Local education associations have a right to bargain with the district over the impact of that executive order.
- Any member who believes they need specific individual representation regarding how their district is implementing that requirement should contact their UniServ field rep.