



Clinton County Health Department

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“Working Together for a Healthier Community”

www.clintonhealth.org



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Prevent. Promote. Protect.

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News Release

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Clarification on School Mask Breaks in Clinton County

Plattsburgh, November 5, 2020. Last week, Governor Cuomo granted county and city government officials the ability to impose mask mandates on local school districts. The new order resulted from a need for county officials to have greater ability to enforce school mask-wearing practices, especially in areas where infection rates are high.

The Clinton County Health Department (CCHD) continues to support consistent and appropriate mask wearing in schools for students, teachers and staff. CCHD recognizes the practice as a key preventive strategy that reduces the risk of a person who is sick from spreading the virus to others. CCHD also recognizes there are situations that make the use of a cloth face covering challenging or dangerous and continues to encourage schools administrators and educators to work together to develop individual plans for those situations; CCHD is available for consult as needed. Masks should not be placed on children younger than 2 years old, anyone who has trouble breathing or is unconscious or sleeping, and anyone who is incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.

To date, the reopening plans of all local school districts address mask wearing throughout the school day for students, staff and teachers, currently necessitating no further action on the part of CCHD in relation to the new mandate. “We are proud of our local districts who went the extra mile in requiring face coverings at all times before it was a mandate. Many schools across the state did not and it has contributed to the spread of COVID-19 in the community,” stated John Kanoza, Director of Public Health in Clinton County.

While the new mandate did not specifically address the issue, it has re-sparked questions about mask breaks in schools. CCHD continues to recommend the thoughtful implementation of mask breaks that aligns with guidance from the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH). In relation to mask breaks, the NYSDOH’s *Interim Guidance for In-Person Instruction at Pre-K to Grade 12 Schools During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency*, states that for schools requiring face coverings be worn by all individuals at all times, students should be allowed to remove their face covering “for short breaks so long as they maintain appropriate social distance.”



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Any removal of masks in group settings increases the risk of virus spread. CCHD has shared a number of suggestions to local school administrators to minimize that risk, including assuring students are seated during breaks, taking those breaks outdoors when possible, and having the breaks overseen by classroom leadership. Mr. Kanoza adds, “We accept there will be times when students and staff will need to remove their masks for short times. We want to help make all of those breaks as safe as possible.” Based upon a review of the re-opening plans of all local schools, CCHD is not identifying any adjustments that need to be made at this time, but has communicated an intent to act on the new mandate to all local districts, if non-compliance with their plans is evident.

Additional guidance and considerations for safe and effective mask wearing in K-12 schools is available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/cloth-face-cover.html>.

About the Clinton County Health Department:

The Health Department is an accredited full service department serving the residents of Clinton County. The Health Department’s Mission is to improve and protect the health, well-being and environment of the people of Clinton County. Visit our website at www.clintonhealth.org or connect with us on Facebook (@clintonhealth), Twitter (@ClintonCountyHD), and Instagram (clintoncountyhealth).

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