



Friday, December 30th, 2022

Dear BPS Community,

We hope you've had a restful break so far! As we return from the height of travel and gatherings amid the spread of new COVID-19 variants, the flu, and other respiratory viral illnesses, we want to share an update regarding our health protocols. We understand that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging time for everyone. While we are all eager to return to a sense of normalcy, we need to take necessary precautions to ensure that the new year starts in a strong and productive way for our schools.

To maximize our ability to keep students healthy and minimize staff absences during this high-risk period, all **BPS schools will adopt temporary masking from Wednesday, January 4th, through Friday, January 13th, 2023**, a total of eight school days. Employees returning to BPS on Tuesday, January 3rd, 2023 are asked and expected to begin masking on that day. **This is our ask and expectation of students and staff, not a mandate**—which will be in effect during the school day on school premises and school buses. BPS will provide disposable face masks to students or staff who need them. **No one will be disciplined or sent home if they refuse to wear a mask.** Masks will be available for student athletes at practices and games, but not expected.

Masking Protocol

Wearing masks is one of the most effective ways to reduce the risk of respiratory viral illness transmission, but we also recognize the impact of masking on our students, as it can be more difficult to understand socioemotional cues with facial expressions covered and for younger children and children with disabilities.

Our decision to implement temporary masking was made in close coordination with the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC), school nurses, and educators to preempt significant staffing shortages, student absences, and the loss of critical learning time.

During this same time period last school year, BPS experienced our largest COVID-19 surge, which resulted in significant staffing shortages that made it nearly impossible to keep all schools open—a daily average of 1,200 staff members and 8,500 students absent throughout January 2022.

While COVID-19 numbers have been less disruptive so far this year, the combination of flu and other respiratory viral illnesses have already resulted in significant staff and student absences, and remain a cause of concern, especially since 60% of all flu cases in Boston have been noted among 17-year-old people and younger and these illnesses disparately impact Black and Brown families in our city. These infections can cause severe illness and hospitalization and throughout Boston, there has been a significant increase in pediatric hospitalizations due to COVID-19, flu, and RSV. Our goal with temporary masking is to mitigate and prevent an even bigger surge that would result in overwhelming student and staff absences this January.



Testing Guidance

BPS has provided iHealth Antigen Test Kits to students and staff, in addition to the regularly offered test kits, for testing during and immediately after the winter break. **We ask that all students take an iHealth Antigen Test on Tuesday evening, January 3rd, or Wednesday morning, January 4th, before the start of the school day and that staff take one the day before returning back to work on January 3rd.**

Testing Positive or Being Symptomatic

If your student tests positive or feels sick, please have them stay home. Please call your student's school to report COVID-19 positive test results and absences. We appreciate your ongoing support, as our families have done an excellent job keeping students home when ill or COVID-19-positive to protect the rest of the school community.

Testing and Vaccine Resources

We strongly encourage everyone to vaccinate against the flu and COVID-19 before returning to school. [A full list of clinics can be found here—including the clinic at the Bolling Building where you can receive a \\$75 gift card for any COVID-19 vaccine.](#)

Please contact the BPS Helpline if you have any questions at 617-635-8873 or by email at helpline@bostonpublicschools.org. [Hours of operation can be found here.](#)

We thank you for your help and cooperation and for all you do to ensure that we are staffed at levels where students can continue to receive a high-quality education in a safe and joyful environment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mary Elizabeth Skipper".

Mary Skipper
Superintendent
Boston Public Schools