

STATEMENT FROM ORANGE COUNTY SUPERINTENDENTS
February 11, 2022

Dear SVUSD Community,

I would like to share with you a joint statement from a coalition of Orange County school district Superintendents regarding the request of Governor Newsom to announce a reasonable timeline for easing school masking requirements and other restrictive protocols, using well-established countywide health metrics as the basis. Please see below. This statement from Orange County Superintendents has also been posted publicly at <https://newsroom.ocde.us/coronavirus-update/#021122>.

Sincerely,
Crystal Turner, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Saddleback Valley Unified School District

STATEMENT FROM ORANGE COUNTY SUPERINTENDENTS:

From the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Orange County's 29 school districts banded together and coordinated closely with the OC Health Care Agency (HCA) to ensure the highest levels of safety for our students, staff and communities. This unified approach allowed us to rapidly share information and best practices as we endured four waves of the virus, multiple variants and a steady stream of new guidance from local, state and national agencies. It also positioned our schools as models for how to safely reopen — and stay open — for in-person instruction. Now, with two years of data points from which to draw, it is time to have a conversation about what comes next.

In Orange County and across the United States, COVID-19 case rates and hospitalizations are falling rapidly in the wake of the recent Omicron spike. Outcomes in other countries that have experienced Omicron suggest the worst of the pandemic is behind us, with many nations lifting restrictions. Even California has announced that it will allow its broad indoor mask mandate to expire after Feb. 15, and numerous experts believe we are now headed toward an endemic stage, in which we live with a diminished version of the virus. **Based on these trends, and following discussions with our HCA partners, our coalition of Orange County superintendents is asking Governor Gavin Newsom and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) to publicly announce a reasonable timeline for easing school masking requirements and other restrictive protocols, using well-established countywide health metrics as the basis.**

As school district leaders, we are legally required to follow public health directives set forth by the governor, the state's public health department and the OC Health Care Agency. Any actions to the contrary risk school closures. Moreover, we believe that safety protocols such as face coverings, while sometimes polarizing, have proven effective in reducing school-based transmission, which in turn allowed our campuses to remain open. Yet these steps, including the masking rules, were not intended to be permanent adaptations to our environment. These policies were introduced to blunt waves of infections that threatened to overrun our health care systems and close our schools. Students and staff did their part — to extraordinary degrees. Now, we must acknowledge that changing circumstances and clear data trends warrant a re-examination of our approach to school safety, if not a full exit strategy and a return to more normal school operations.

We believe overall hospitalization rates and ICU capacities represent an accurate picture of the threat this virus poses to schools and communities, but we would defer to the expertise of the HCA and the CDPH to establish reliable benchmarks that can be used as the basis for easing restrictions. We also understand that there always exists the potential for new variants or viruses that may renew calls to flatten the curve.

From the onset of this public health crisis, the superintendents of Orange County have been clear-eyed and united behind the goal of providing safe, welcoming and equitable learning environments for students. Two years later, that remains unchanged, as does our commitment to working with our families, employees, public health partners and community members to move our county forward, together.