

Official Minutes of the
Oak Park Board of Education District 97
260 Madison Street, Oak Park
February 27, 2022 Regular Meeting

This meeting was held in-person and virtually using Zoom during the time of the Coronavirus pandemic. One or more of the board members met in-person and everyone else were virtual.

President Kim called the meeting to order at 1:02 p.m.

ROLL CALL

Present: Kim, Kearney, Ross Dribin, Hurd Johnson, Kinhal, Spurlock, Moore

Absent: None

Also Present: Interim Superintendent Dr. Griff Powell, Interim Senior Director of Human Resources Timothy Kilrea, Senior Director of Technology Michael Arensdorff, Senior Director of Communications Amanda Siegfried, Chief Academic and Accountability Officer Eboney Lofton, Senior Director of Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment Tawanda Lawrence, Senior Director of Equity Carrie Kamm, Senior Director of Buildings & Grounds Jeanne Keane, Security and School Safety Manager Jim Hackett, Caroline Roselli Robbins Schwartz and Lonya Boose Board Secretary.

OPEN
SESSION

OPEN SESSION

President Kim motioned that the Board move into Open Session at 1:02 p.m. All present members of the Board were in agreement. The Board convened in Open Session at 1:02 p.m.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

PUBLIC
COMMENT

Dear board:

As a parent of a D97 student and of a child not yet eligible to be vaccinated against COVID, I write to you to urge you to not yet roll back mitigation measures and to maintain the indoor mask mandate as you did earlier this week. The state of the pandemic has not changed since Tuesday. What has changed is how the CDC tracks metrics so that people can live like the pandemic is over (it's not) without guilt.

Facts that the CDC metrics do not change:

1. SARS-COV-2 is an airborne virus.
2. Masks, air filtration and improved ventilation are critical tools to stopping the spread of the virus, while vaccination prevents severe illness and death. Together they create an effective layered mitigation strategy.
3. Viruses don't stay confined to schools. Kids who contract the virus at school, bring the virus home.
4. Schools without mask mandates had more outbreaks than those with mask mandates.
(<https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/573833-schools-without-mask-mandate-35-times-more-likely-to-have-covid-19>)
5. Significant portions of our population are not yet eligible to be vaccinated, immunocompromised or on the CDC's list of individuals who are at high-risk and instructed in the new guidelines to take additional measures to protect themselves.

Wearing a mask was never solely about individual protection. It was always about communal protection and caring for our neighbors.

I urge you to stick to the plan agreed to this past week and use the evidence-based toolkit assembled by public health and infectious disease experts on keeping schools safe: urgencyofequity.org

Just because our national and state leaders have bowed to political commentators who decided without meaningful evidence that the pandemic is over, does not mean you have to. You made an important and courageous decision to protect our students and our community just this past Tuesday. Please stick to it.

Thank you,

Shannon Straw

Dear Board Members,

I appreciate you taking the time this weekend to convene to discuss the district's Covid-19 mitigations. I hope that you will follow the CDC and ISBE guidance and the statements of our governor, and make masks optional beginning on Monday, February 28. At Hatch, my daughter's elementary school, 84 percent of students are known to be vaccinated. It's time for masks to be optional.

On February 23, Dr. Chapple tweeted "Schools without mask[s] required were 3.5 times more likely to have outbreaks as compared to schools with mask[s] required." Unfortunately, Dr. Chapple's sole source for this information is a widely debunked study. The study period was for July 15-August 31 for schools in two counties in Arizona. Schools in these counties weren't universally open during this 6-week period. The study also didn't distinguish between transmissions that occurred in the school or outside of school. The study also included schools that were fully remote during the 6-week period. Scientists who have tried to recreate the study have been unable to do so. The Atlantic (linked below), and many others, have written about the significant flaws in this study.

[The CDC's Flawed Case for Wearing Masks in School - The Atlantic](#)

D97 is already an outlier in its hesitancy to reduce Covid-19 mitigations. Now is not the time to rely on an unscientific study to determine that the mask mandate for D97 schools should remain, notwithstanding the guidance from the CDC, ISBE, etc.

Please follow the guidance and make masks optional beginning on Monday.

Best regards,
Jenny Austin

Dear District 97 School Board Members and Leaders,

Attached please find a petition from village residents with now over 400 signatures in favor of compassionate, equity-focused, & science-based approaches to COVID protections in Oak Park. Below are some of the public comments which were posted at <https://www.change.org/p/elected-officials-of-d97-compassionate-equity-focused-science-based-approaches-to-covid-protections-in-oak-park>. We are happy to provide a spreadsheet listing all current signatures at your request and to continue updating. We hope you keep these considerations in mind when choosing how to use your authority to change COVID protections.

With appreciation for your service,
Oak Park Community for Science & Compassion

- I signed this petition as the parent of a child who is too young to receive the COVID vaccine. I implore others to please continue to wear masks to protect our precious infants and toddlers. Please help me protect my son.
- I have two kids under 4 and a school aged child in elementary school. Because of mask mandates, I feel safer sending my children to school and safer going to businesses. I hope mask mandates remain in schools at least until the most vulnerable have the opportunity to get vaccinated and boosted.
- Mask mandates or not, I will continue to mask to help protect my neighbors and friends – especially those who cannot get vaccinated or are immunocompromised. It is essential for everyone to do their part to keep Oak Parkers safe. But without an insistence on masking, many folks will not wear them. When that happens, chances are we will find ourselves once again facing high infection and hospitalization rates, and the most vulnerable will be at greatest risk. Inclusion and public safety must be prioritized over an individual's mild discomfort and inconvenience.
- I want to keep everyone safe, especially those young children who still haven't been vaccinated.
- My son is immunocompromised and not yet eligible to be vaccinated. I want to continue to keep him safe as well as other vulnerable individuals in our community.
- I have multiple underlying conditions that put me at high risk for a severe COVID response.
- I'd commit to wearing masks in public for the next 50 years if I knew it could help save someone from death or disability. 5 people died of COVID in Oak Park last week. I want to do my part to keep that number down. Especially with more variants on the way. I'd rather be too cautious than too risky.
- I support public health measures that are both science-based and equitable in protecting our vulnerable residents.
- Staying smart and keeping protections in place until rates are low is the best way for all of us to feel safer. The enemy is the virus, not each other.
- My husband has cancer and an immune system disorder. There are still people for whom the virus is not over and they deserve our support.
- The vaccine does not prevent one from getting, or spreading, COVID. It keeps people out of the hospital. For those of us who are immunocompromised, we rely on the extra measure of protection additional mitigations provide. I know several vaxxed, boosted people who still got

COVID, albeit mild cases. I was exposed to one of those folks in my own circle. Luckily, due to masking and social distancing, I have not caught it so far. Not everyone who can't get, or wouldn't significantly benefit from, the vaccine looks sickly or infirm, but the consequences of getting covid are still devastating. COVID is going to be with us long-term, but ending masking and other mitigation too soon puts many of us unnecessarily at risk. We, too, need to be out in the world working and caring for our families and would like to do so without higher risk than necessary.

Hi,

Thank you for reading and considering this public comment:

I understand we might be headed in the direction of mask-optional and I am generally in support of it. However, I think only considering general data and trends ignores our most vulnerable students. I also think making uniform decisions does not always work when our school population spans so many demographics. Therefore, I would like to urge the board to please consider any policies placed for EC students separate from the rest of the district on the grounds that EC students are a. not yet eligible for vaccines and b. more likely to have IEPs and accompanying physical disabilities put them in a higher risk category if they were to get COVID.

Thanks,
Nancy Schroeder

Dear District 97 Board Members and Leaders,

I understand that you are facing some big questions as the CDC guidance changed yesterday. As you know, you have authority to make your own policies in the best interest of our students, teachers, and community. Many D97 students live with unvaccinated siblings who may have the opportunity to get a vaccine this spring! If you choose to make masks recommended rather than required, I encourage you to use that language and make them “strongly recommended.” I also ask that you set forth a timeline that allows families and teachers to prepare. High-risk families need time to adjust their plans and prepare with high-quality masks. The village’s stock of free high-quality masks were gone within hours. Teachers and staff need to prepare students to respond with kindness to each other. Further, there will be anxiety among students regarding the sudden change. A “ripping off the band-aid” approach is highly inappropriate for school-aged children, like Dr. Morrison advised in the meeting earlier this week. I also encourage you to consider required shield testing to help monitor the spread.

Thank you,
Ryan Abbott

Dear District 97 Board and respective parents and families:

Please keep mask mandates in place in our schools. There is no harm done, nor risk to the wearer-of-masks with mandates in place. However, there is known, life-threatening risk to others in the community when masks are not being worn indoors.

We do not yet know the long-term impact for children nor adults beyond two years of data, but we do know that at least 10-30% of people infected by COVID-19—most of whom were considered to have “mild infection”—go on to experience lingering, debilitating symptoms, including children of all ages.

This statistic holds true in those vaccinated, or not vaccinated, reinfected or first-time infected, and with every variant thus far.

<https://www.longcovidkids.org/long-covid-research-on-children>

As a community, we have long made decisions outside those made by local or national officials to support and protect individuals and families within our community who have otherwise been abandoned and/or ignored.

Do this now. Please.

Sincerely,
Laura Noah

I do hope D97 plans to follow the newest CDC guidelines and make masking optional in schools, effective this week. Oak Park is not an island or bubble, so shouldn't be held to different standards than other communities in Cook County.

As a community, I hope we can continue to be respectful of each family's choices, but also not push off following the latest science any longer. We don't need to wait for warmer weather or wait until spring break to make this adjustment. Kids have been resilient through all of this and will continue to be through this adjustment to being mask optional. In fact, the joy of seeing students' smiles may make the schools feel more like communities once again.

Megan Murray Elsener

I am writing to share some concerns about the transition to making masks "optional" for D97 students and teachers. Given that many public health experts, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, are still recommending masking, how will this change be communicated to students? I hope that we will be consistent in encouraging them to wear masks, even though you can no longer require them. Will teachers be allowed to require masks in their individual classrooms? Will the District provide high quality masks to students who are at high risk as well as to those in close contact with vulnerable students? and with vulnerable teachers and staff? I'm asking for you to make a concrete plan for how to offset the risk for those for whom this change will pose a real increased threat. How will teachers and staff deal with bullying surrounding mask choice? It will be more difficult to reintroduce required masking after lifting the requirement altogether. Is there a gradual approach that will be both inline with village, county and state level guidance and in the interest of maximum mitigation of spread at school such as requiring shield testing? What is the plan for increasing vaccination rates across the district? For returning to masks if necessary?

I want my vaccinated kindergartener to know that we do all that we can to take care of each other, and while much of the data suggests that she individually will have a mild case if infected with Covid-19, her unvaccinated younger brother, elderly grandparents, and immunocompromised community members deserve the protection that we can give them. I hope this is the message we communicate when modifying the district's covid-19 mitigations.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this difficult matter.
Jenna Leving Jacobson, PhD
Parent of a D97 student

Dear Board:

Please keep masking in our schools. I believe we need to remain conscious throughout this school year that we still have immunocompromised people and unvaccinated children in D97 households. While my 2nd grader swears, she will remain masked to protect her three year old sister, it is placing a lot of pressure and anxiety on her. We also want to visit her grandmother very soon. And the pressure remains to keep the elderly safe. I know for certain there are a number of families out there that feel the same way, but don't have the courage to speak up. Let's keep compassion in our schools and keep Covid out of our schools.

Amanda Barker-Arigo

I urge the Board to take the time to carefully consider the rapid changes in recommendations regarding COVID-19, from both the state and federal level. We should consider the recommendations that are best for our whole community. The new CDC guidelines are designed to manage hospital capacity, and not reduce infections or transmission. The American Association of Pediatrics still recommends masking in schools and the President of the AMA recommends indoor masking. The Board has set smart, clear metrics to determine masking and I hope you will continue to use them. When it is time to safely remove indoor masks - ideally in conjunction with CO2 monitoring and improved classroom ventilation - there should be a clear plan to explain these changes to students and families, including how to respect students who must or choose to continue masking. I appreciate your hard work on this difficult matter.

-Maria Pyra, PhD Epidemiology, D97 kindergarten mom

Thank you to the whole Board for coming together in this emergency meeting. I'm writing to urge the board to follow the CDC guidance of mask-optional in schools effective Monday. We have followed CDC guidance for the whole pandemic, most times being more conservative than our surrounding districts. Since we've followed their guidance all along, it wouldn't make sense to ignore it now. please adopt the mask-optional policy on Monday and let's try and have our kids have the most "normal" end to a school year than they've had since 2019.

Thank you

Lauren Pero

With the updated CDC regulations there should be no reason that D97 does not follow suit. All surrounding towns and communities will be mask optional and there is no logical reason that Oak Park is mask mandatory. Our children deserve as normal of a school

Life that we can give them and seeing their teachers and peers' faces is needed. Anyone can continue to wear masks if that is their choice or need, but for those who don't want to wear masks we should have that option as well.

Jen Stroiman

Most of the country has decided to move forward without masks, it's about time Oak Park follows the CDC recommendation. I'm not sure what type of political agenda the board is trying to push but it's ridiculous that there is even a discussion over this topic. Let the kids go to school without a mask on Monday!!!

Jason Stroiman

Hello Board,

ISBE stated on Friday evening “ Per the Governor's announcement, masks are optional for all schools and school districts starting Monday, Feb. 28.” D97 should immediately comply with ISBE’s directive and become mask optional in all buildings and situations starting on 2/28.

-Matthew Arata

D97 Board of Education

Follow the science.

The folks with the most expertise regards masks in school are the CDC.

The CDC makes it clear -- at this point -- that masks should be optional in our schools provided the new risk metrics.

Should the Oak Park Department of Public Health (OPPH) advice deviate from CDC guidance, I strongly suggest you follow the CDC. OPPH is one person’s professional opinion on the matter, while the CDC’s has thousands of the leading minds in American crafting policy.

Follow the CDC. Follow the science.

It's time. Masks need to be option effective 2/28 without delay.

Thank you,
John Chomicz
Parent of Brooks 6th Grader

Dear D97 Board Members,

I’m writing to advocate for D97 maintaining the mask-mandate in all schools through the remainder of the school year. If masks are not mandatory there will be a number of immune-compromised and medically fragile students who will not be able to attend school in person. What will be done for these students? Since they will be unable to attend school in person, will they be given real-time Zoom/online access to their classrooms during the school day? Or is D97 prepared to provide in-home tutoring for these students?

All our students must be provided a free and public education as required by law. Please consider this requirement when making decisions about the mask-mandate in our schools.

Thank you –
Lynda Cafasso
(parent of D97 student)

Dear D97 school board,

Thank you for your ongoing service to our community during this difficult time. We are a cardiologist and an epidemiologist. We are also the parents of a D97 student, and two younger children including an infant who is not eligible for COVID vaccination.

We are writing to encourage the board to maintain District 97's indoor universal mask mandate. We think this is important for the following reasons:

- 1). COVID mitigation measures are best used in a layered approach. Relying only on Oak Park's high vaccination rate puts many community members at risk, especially unvaccinated young children, immunocompromised people, and those with underlying health conditions. Vaccination alone is not enough.
- 2). The new CDC metrics for removing mask mandates are designed to ensure a hospital bed is available when needed. They are not designed to prevent high levels of viral transmission in the community. We believe Oak Park can do better than simply ensuring hospital beds are available. We have the tools we need to prevent people from contracting this dangerous virus and we should use those tools.
- 3). We remain focused on the communities most impacted by this pandemic. As of October 2021, more than 120,000 children in the US have lost a primary caregiver to COVID. Families of color are more likely to have lost a family member. We believe this is enduring and significant trauma and we must do everything we can to prevent further harm.
- 4). Children with health conditions or those who live with vulnerable family members deserve safe and equal access to school. Universal masking keeps these children and families safer.

We believe the mask mandate should remain in place for the remainder of the school year and then a detailed reassessment can occur over the course of the summer.

Thank you,
Jonathan Tottleben, MD
Julia Howland, MPH

Good Afternoon,

I wanted to address the board today as the mother of two children in D97.

I know the board has to make some different decisions surrounding masking and other COVID mitigation strategies. I wanted to speak to you from the perspective of the parent of a three year old child in one of your early childhood programs. I would implore the board not to forget about the early childhood students in D97 when making any decisions regarding masking ect. You have a population of 122 students who are ineligible for the COVUD vaccine. This makes them a very vulnerable population. Even more so with mask mandates being lifted in the community and the more contagious omicron variant being the dominant strain of COVID. I feel their needs were overlooked when the CDC and others made recent decisions regarding mask mandates. Many people think of schools as having children five years and up.

If it were up to me, I would want a mask mandate to continue for all students and staff until my three year old has the opportunity to get his COVUD vaccine. So that his older brother who is vaccinated does not catch COVID and bring it home to him. COVID is still out there and children under five are now the age group with the fastest-growing rate of new infections and hospitalizations. If this is not possible, I would implore the board to at least maintain COVID mitigation strategies including a mask mandate for staff and students in the early childhood programs as well as a vaccine mandate for staff working in the early childhood programs. And to work to keep early childhood students separated from unmasked elementary students. Please work to protect this unvaccinated, vulnerable young population.

If masks become optional in my son's PKP class, I will likely be forced to withdraw him from the program to protect his health. This would break his little heart as he loves taking the school bus, seeing Ms. Katie, seeing his friends and playing with "lots of toys at preschool." In my child's case, this would also deprive him of his OT, PT, speech therapy and social work services. I would ask that you not force me to choose between my child's educational and therapy needs and his health.

Thank you

Emily LCSW

Time is up, D97!

I will give the board the benefit of the doubt that the purpose of this meeting is to formally acknowledge and communicate to stakeholders that, indeed, masking is now optional in our district. The unlawful executive order has been overturned by the courts, rejected by a panel of state legislators, and only in the face of those defeats, lifted by the Governor. The Illinois State Board of Education has publicized that masking is optional FOR ALL SCHOOLS and SCHOOL DISTRICTS in Illinois effective 2/28. There can simply be no other outcome for this meeting.

It would be logical to remove all other useless mitigations around recess and lunch. It is past time to unburden our teachers and children of these measures that are of little or no discernible benefit.

A period of transition of any length, is unacceptable. The initial court injunction was issued on Feb 4th. The General Assembly Joint Committee vote was on Feb 15th. The appellate court ruled on Feb 17th. What has the board been doing during this period of time, if not preparing for this eventuality? It is unfortunate that we have not had any clarity or leadership from the Village around our local indoor masking policies prior to Friday evening. But it is imperative we lift the mandate on Monday.

We did not have the opportunity for a smooth transition to remote learning when schools were shut in March of 2020. The community is ready for masks to be optional on Feb 28th of 2022. We can handle it. What we don't need is a showdown tomorrow morning. Time is up.

Thank you
Dave Ardell

D97 board members,

I appreciate the work done over the last two years. We have continually looked to the CDC for guidance, I am asking that we continue to do so. Our town is highly vaccinated and we are in low transmission. Please immediately follow the new guidance from the CDC. We should be mask optional and lift all other "mitigations" that D97 is currently mandating. Our children should have normal lunch period, field trips, parent volunteers, etc.

Thank you.

Lauren Hyde

D97 Board -

I am hopeful that D97 will follow surrounding districts, private schools in Oak Park and the CDC in making masks optional in our schools. We have followed all of the OP Health Dept. rules and regulations for two years. I have felt the pressure by our Health Department to vaccinate my children - only for our school to be shut down anyway. It is time to let parents decide what is best for our families. We are a HIGHLY vaccinated community. We are not CPS.

It's time to return to normalcy and stop spending endless hours focusing on Covid - there are many other issues in our district that need your attention. Please consider making this step and getting our district back on track.

Rachel Fobes

With the news of the state-wide mask mandate for schools being dropped on Monday, plus the updated CDC guidelines allowing Oak Park to drop indoor masking on Monday as well, I urge our schools to follow suit and go mask optional. Now is the time to show leadership and help guide our children into a new normal.

It is critical that your communication is clear, consistent and reflective of what's actually happening in our community - one that is highly vaccinated and now falling in the low risk "masks not recommended" category.

Matt Gibbs (Hatch Parent)

Good Morning D97 Board!

Thank you for your time over the last two years. As we all know scientific entities such as the CDC, IDPH, and ISBE have removed mandates requiring masks in school effective tomorrow. The Illinois Supreme Court also refused to hear Governor Pritzker's case last week and found he deliberately circumvented laws to illegally quarantine our children without due process by requiring masks. Thankfully many families applied legal pressure to the governor and he made a statement that masks were optional in ALL school districts as of February 28th, 2022.

I am thankful D97 didn't bargain away our Children's rights in a CBA like CPS did so there are zero legal restrictions requiring masks in D97. Last but not least, as I pointed out to the district on the 15th of February, Oak Park Health Department exempted all K-12 schools here in Oak Park back on the 12th of January.

It is time for us to join the ranks of leading school districts in the state of IL and make masks "recommended but not required" along with the rest of the state on 2/28/2022.

Thanks!
Adam

Good afternoon,

On March 11, 2020 the WHO declared a pandemic and for 718 days we have been in one of the most challenging periods in recent memory. Since then, the board has been tasked with an impossible situation.

Oak Park public schools have followed the CDC guidance from the beginning and now it appears that the science of the CDC is not good enough for many. The quest for zero covid and zero risk as it relates to

covid is nothing more than a fantasy at this point.

The CDC has spoken. Masks can and should come off in schools, regardless of vaccination status, unless covid metrics are high. Oak Park metrics are far from high, as laid out by the CDC itself. Why would we choose not to not follow the science?

It may not feel comfortable but the time has come for the children to show their smiles.

Thank you for your consideration and time.

Tina

I am writing in support of lifting the mask mandate. The CDC guidance states that Green counties should not require masks in schools. Cook County is not only Green, but Oak Park is highly vaccinated, including a high vaccination rate among school aged children. High quality N95 masks are readily available that protect the wearer as well as those around them. For those who do not have access, the schools could provide masks, possible via community donations.

The reality is that the US has decided on a different Covid management strategy and Oak Park cannot successfully pursue its own strategy in isolation. We are all in this together because of how this virus transmits.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Cathy Raschke

Dear board,

I'm the parents of a Beye bobcat. My husband is immune compromised due to cancer and an immune system disorder. The mitigations d97 put in place has helped keep us safe. Our family is still vulnerable to covid and that hasn't changed with the latest guidance. If anything, we are more vulnerable now since others are eager to be done with covid. Some of us don't have the privilege of being done with covid. We're told to follow the science, but the science says families like ours are still at high risk. There are still vulnerable families and children under 5 in the district and transmission is still high. I've been so disheartened by how many people have heard our story but don't think we're worth protecting. Please help protect us.

Kim Jackewicz

Science has proven masking should be optional in schools. Vaccines work. Kids are in a low risk group. Screening and confirmatory testing is widely available.

In the event you decide masking should continue, or if you avoid the decision altogether by saying you "need more time", you owe it to the community to tell us under what circumstances masks should be optional. If you can't, it only demonstrates a lack of leadership.

Your heart is in the right place by wanting to protect kids at all costs. But your reasoning and logic are flawed. Trust the science. Believe in the science. Make decisions based on science.

Stop listening to lawyers. Start listening to doctors.

I will close by saying the guiding philosophy of “out of an abundance of caution” isn’t a plan. It’s wishful thinking not grounded in science.

Please make masks optional in schools.

Steve and Carolyn Goldhaber

We are writing in support of D97 administration and BOE making masks optional for all students and staff effective Monday, February 28th. We are also in strong support of D97 schools allowing mask optional field trips and visitors, returning to normal lunch procedures, allowing people to be less than 3 feet apart when needed for instruction, and continuing to not exclude asymptomatic close contacts of positive Covid-19 cases regardless of mask usage or vaccination status. We support continuing weekly optional SHIELD testing and, of course, encouraging mask wearing for those who choose to wear one. This is all in line with current CDC recommendations. On a personal note, our children are more than ready to go without masks. Our 3rd grader finds it difficult to understand what his classmates are saying through the mask, and our Kindergartener has really struggled to learn how to read from masked teachers. Please join the 94% of Illinois school districts that have realized they are not a bubble and have chosen to follow the science.

- Joshua and Lauren Arends

Dear School Board Members and Superintendents,

I appreciated the approach and considerations that were discussed in the last board meeting just five days ago. As you meet to consider the latest guidance and changes from the CDC and ISBE, I please ask that you stay the course that was outlined previously. The approach of removing mitigations one at a time while continuing to closely track the impact will allow teachers, staff and parents to make and communicate the changes that are occurring. I was struck by Dr. Morrison’s comments last board meeting – our children want to protect their peers. Being together is what is most important to them. We are a community that cares for each other and the mitigations we have ensure that our most vulnerable are protected.

I also reiterate my ask about making investments in air purifiers in every classroom as well as continuous CO2 monitoring. These are actions that will pay dividends and provide a collective mitigation.

Regards,
Ranga Bodla
Parent of Two Holmes Hawks

Dear School Board Members,

Throughout the pandemic we have been told to follow CDC guidelines. Now that both the CDC and the ISBE have made clear statements no longer recommending masks in schools I hope the board can make a similarly clear statement on D97’s position before school tomorrow.

Per the ISBE: “Masks are optional for schools and school districts starting 2/28.” Please let Oak Park join the other 94% of schools in IL following suit with the CDC recommendations of making masks a choice for the individual student and family.

Thank you and I appreciate you all taking time for this last minute meeting.

-Audra Fullerton

Hello there,

I am the parent of two D97 children (Hatch and Brooks). Please consider the lessons of the past two years and the ramifications of removing COVID mitigations too soon before responding abruptly to a small group of vocal parents to go “back to normal”. I support scaling back COVID mitigations like testing and masks in due time. The fact of the matter is that children 5 and under cannot get vaccinated and there are still a substantial number of people in this state/country who are testing positive every day. Please consider delaying any additional rollback of mitigations until after Spring break.

This will allow community transmission to continue to fall and allow for more time to obtain approval for a vaccine for the five and under age group.

Thank you for your consideration.

Mollie Hertel

2 years. 2 years our children will never get back... The time to end the pandering and politics and move on is this very moment. D97 has been provided the off-ramp by both the CDC and state of Illinois and I implore you to take advantage of the opportunity.

Jeremy Schmidt

Unmask the kids. Follow the law.

Unmask the kids. Stop passing the burden on to our children.

Unmask the kids. Our children have suffered enough.

Unmask the kids.

Rich Fobes

Dear Board,

Thank you for your time. Gail Galivan.

Anyone requiring or mandating a mask (or any other form of quarantine) without DUE PROCESS OF LAW is violating rights. Any and all school districts, school boards, educators and/or staff will face the risk of legal action by doing so. There are currently funds in escrow that have been raised for that purpose.

Masking is a form of quarantine. This standing Cook County Court Order below correctly states: "must also allege a “medical basis for the duration of the quarantine ”... and then prove it by clear and convincing evidence.”

ALSO, please note for future purposes, an average of 50% false positive COV-19 test results with the testing of a healthy population would not meet the standard for "clear and convincing evidence" of rising cases to warrant quarantine. The burden of proof of evidence is on the party that is mandating quarantine.

See: FEBRUARY 22,2022, COURT ORDER, COOK COUNTY JUDGE SANJAY T. TAYLOR

<https://americanfreedomsociety.org/cook-county-health-department-denied-order-of-quarantine/>

On February 22, 2022, Cook County Judge Sanjay T. Taylor

"..dismissed the Cook County Health Department's case without prejudice, stating,...

CCDPH must also allege a "medical basis" for the duration of the quarantine period that it imposed on the Respondent and then prove it by clear and convincing evidence."

..Commissioner of Health of the City of Chicago, issued an Indoor Mask Order, which also

violates an individual's due process, as it relates to needing a court order of quarantine – the same issues brought before Cook County Judge Taylor.

While it seems the Cook County Health Department is now following the rule of law, the City of Chicago Health Department continues to violate citizens due process rights."

Dear D97 Board,

Please continue to consider the advice of medical experts above the pressure of the frustrated crowd.

Please also do not let inertia prevent nimble decision-making as new data presents itself.

Whatever decisions are made today please allow the administration the latitude to reinstitute localized masking rules should cases increase within specific buildings.

Thank you for your service and care for our children,
Matt Fruth

Good Afternoon

We are writing in support of D97 administration and BOE making masks optional for all students and staff effective Monday, February 28th. We are also in strong support of D97 schools allowing mask optional field trips and visitors, returning to normal lunch procedures, allowing people to be less than 3 feet apart when needed for instruction, and continuing to not exclude asymptomatic close contacts of positive Covid-19 cases regardless of mask usage or vaccination status.

We also support continuing weekly optional SHIELD testing and, of course, encouraging mask wearing for those who choose to wear one. This is all in line with current CDC recommendations. On a personal note, our children are more than ready to go without masks. Our 4th grader with autism finds it difficult to understand what his classmates are saying through the mask and continually struggles with his social skills. Please join the 94% of Illinois school districts that have chosen to follow the science and allow masks to be optional for all students and staff in D97.

Warm regards

Garrett and Katie Diamond

Dear District 97 Board Members:

When considering removing covid mitigations such as masking, I implore you to consider the students in our community who are medically compromised and cannot choose to unmask. Additionally, please consider the younger students & siblings not eligible yet to get vaccinated. What we do as a community affects everyone in the community.

The CDC has consistently stated that masks work in reducing the spread of covid. Dr. Walensky has stated that the recent guidance is based on wanting “to give people a break from things like mask wearing” not because proper masks are ineffective.

Please carefully consider our vulnerable student population when making decisions.

Thank you for all your hard work and service.

Respectfully,
Linda Sordilla

Hello D97 Board,

I appreciate all of you and your service to our community! Though I’d strongly prefer masking inside buildings through the remainder of the school year to protect those who are vulnerable, if that is not possible, please consider a mask-weaning process for our schools. Many young persons experience anxiety and confusion in spaces where others are unmasked, even if they are masked themselves. An abrupt departure of the past 2 years, where we’ve cultivated practices of collective care, feels cold. Please utilize this opportunity to smooth the transition and guide us with intention to a new phase.

Thank you for your leadership!
Dot Lambshead Roche

Dear Board,

I am the mother of two D97 students. I am also a Covid long hauler. I know firsthand the extreme difficulty of living with the aftereffects of covid, and I would not wish them upon anyone else. I’ve linked to a study below that notes that double-vaccinated individuals still have a 9.5% chance of developing post-acute sequelae of the virus.

I would like to ask the board to please require masking for the rest of the year. If it can save one family in our district from suffering the way my family has, it will be worth it.

Thank you,
Antonia Davison

Link to study preprint here:

<https://twitter.com/dr2nisreenalwan/status/1497184391604412453?s=21>

Dear Board Members,

Today, I'd like to once again request that the Board decide to lift all restrictions and mandates throughout district schools effective immediately. I was disappointed by the board's foolish and misguided decision on Monday to continue with the current unlawful Covid-19 mitigation policies. The downstate court ruling on February 4th struck down the governor's executive order, which allowed schools to exclude students and enforce mask mandates without the due process required by Illinois law, as illegal. Now, as the state's motion to appeal has been denied by both the 4th appellate court and the Illinois Supreme Court, school districts and local health departments no longer have the legal authority to enforce their current policies without a court order and I believe that's a major factor contributing to today's emergency meeting along with other recent developments, most notably updated CDC guidance. As a member of the Oak Park community and as a parent of a District 97 student, I expect my taxes to go towards the development of an enriching and positive learning environment and not towards fighting futile legal battles, which is surely where this will end up if you decide to continue with the current policy. With the updated guidance issued by the CDC on Friday, which classified Illinois as "Low" transmission and a recommendation that all indoor mask mandates be lifted, including in schools, I hope that you can redeem your decision on Monday to not follow the law and decide today to follow the science. My hope is that tomorrow morning we can return to viewing our children as human beings, full of curiosity, energy and potential and not as "possible vectors of disease" and the school as being a place to foster that curiosity and realize that potential instead of as what it has become over the last two years, a prison whose energy is entirely irrationally focused on stopping an airborne pathogen at the expense of all else.

Kevin Cebulski

I am writing in support of D97 administration and BOE making masks optional for all students and staff effective Monday, February 28th. We encourage mask wearing for those who choose to wear one and continued conversation with our students about respecting others choices on this. This is all in line with current CDC recommendations.

I am also in strong support of D97 schools allowing parent volunteers for art appreciation and other supplemental help for our teachers, visitors to events within the school, age appropriate field trips, and returning to normal lunch procedures. I would also like to see the elimination on the heavy use of iPads for lunchtime entertainment and group projects with peers sitting a few feet away.

Thank you

Beth Siegel

To the D97 school board,

I am writing to support making masking optional for all students and staff, to align with the state's board of education recommendation. We have made progress over the last few years with mitigating the virus, and it's time we move forward (along with the majority of the school districts in this state) and adjust our lives into this next phase of combating this pandemic. Our kids deserve to live without fear, and it's time we let kids be kids. I have no doubt that we are all protected without the use of masks indoors, seeing that the new guidelines from the CDC has shown that Cook County has low transmission, and this is in addition to our town's high vaccination rate.

Thank you,
Jude Santos

Dear D97 Board members and Interim Superintendents Dr. Powell and Dr. Wernet,

Thank you all for your continued service to our community. We, as a community, are again at a decision-making point, and I want to acknowledge the many considerations that I know you are taking into account when processing information and making decisions related to the latest Covid-19 mitigation guidance.

As a community, we have tried time and time again to push back against the common “majority rules” approach to decision-making. Most notably, our D97 Equity Policy ushered in and requires a different approach. Rather than only listening to the loudest voices, we now ask, “Who isn’t being heard?” and “Are we considering not only the majority but also the minority?” We also look to make sure that supports are in place ahead of time to mitigate future harm.

I ask that you take this same approach now. The easier thing to do is to pick a side and move forward. To make a more nuanced plan will require more effort, but we know that it’s possible. The best analogy that I can think of that is most accessible is that of food allergies. Years ago, many community members felt strongly that their children shouldn’t be limited in their food choices for snack and/or lunch based on other students’ needs. Slowly, and with the help of district support and communication, we now have a comprehensive plan to keep children with food allergies safe. As a parent of a child with food allergies, I’ve watched this evolve from a small group of concerned parents in a living room crafting the beginning of a manual to a widely understood and supported district-wide plan.

The best part about the way that the food allergy management plan evolved was the constant focus on making sure that students with food allergies weren’t stigmatized during the process. Classroom-wide (or school-wide) decisions were made to ensure that additional attention wasn’t directed at the children with the food allergies themselves. It wasn’t even necessary for anyone to know who had the allergy.

I think a similar approach can be taken with masks. This will only work with a thoughtful and nuanced approach. Please help the community to transition in a way that keeps the most vulnerable at the forefront of the decision-making and not an afterthought. Taking the time to assess the needs of each classroom, based on individual needs, can be done. Jumping to mask-optional overnight would leave many families behind.

Please take the time to make sure that we have a district plan that we can sustain. Families with students and/or family members with a variety of health conditions are counting on you during this uncertain time.

Thank you again for your continued leadership.

Katherine Murray Liebl

The reputation Oak Park has in the world is one where we do not simply do the minimum that is mandated, but that we decide as a community to go beyond that, to create a community that has safety for more than just the privileged and powerful.

This is sometimes an easier thing to say than to do — declarations are simple, and showy. Actually, being mindful about the distribution of comfort, so that those of us who have more can share with those who have less, takes more thought and action.

We have lost national support for doing what needs to be done to keep our vulnerable neighbors safe. But that does not mean we are required to go along with that. We have a choice to make, as a community, that we are entrusting you as our elected representatives to make after hearing our needs and weighing the cost.

I am sending, under separate cover, the blunt words my middle schooler had to say about the current situation. Meanwhile I note that unlike budget considerations, whether to maintain a mask mandate for D97 is nearly cost-free, compared to many other measures — and it has a benefit far greater, that vulnerable parents and family and friends would gladly pay to protect our unvaccinated, immune compromised, and otherwise vulnerable among us.

Taking down the mask mandate so abruptly is likely to cause huge distress among those who have found the masks a comfort rather than an oppression — and it increases the risk even for those who will keep wearing masks. One way masking with the best available masks is still TEN TIMES LESS EFFECTIVE than if it's two-way, and it protects the wearer for only 1/4 of the time the children spend in school daily.

My middle schooler will not be returning to classroom instruction while rates are still high and unmasking is encouraged. I suspect we are not alone in this decision; many families have younger siblings who are not yet protected by vaccination. My middle schooler and I remain dismayed that there is no remote learning offered if wearing a mask is really such a horror.

Please do what's kind and safe, rather than the minimum.

Thank you,

Kat Tanaka Okopnik

From my middle schooler:

Three days ago, I wrote a letter where I attempted to write politely instead of voicing my true feelings about people who incorrectly wear their masks, or just don't wear them at all. I have since been informed that I can be more overtly aggressive. So, here's my opinion:

One. Literally all it takes to protect everyone around you is putting some rubber bands around your ears or ponytail. Do you not care about people's lives?

Two. "I dOn'T KNoW wHAt'S iN vACcInES" well do you know what's in bleach or horse drugs? Do you even know what's in the food you eat? Plus, you could literally just Google "what's in covid vaccines" and get a list of EVERY ingredient in it.

Three. I heard there were concerns about tracking microchips in vaccines. If anybody reading this has similar concerns, then I would like to say that that's stupid. Do you know how much that would cost compared to just... checking security cameras and/or your social media? The CHEAPEST I could find a tracking microchip for was \$7.63. Besides, for every vaccinated person to get one (at about the lowest price we can assume) , it would cost ~33,260,000,000 dollars

Kat Tanaka Okopnik

Dear D97 board and community,

I know you are yet again faced with having to make a difficult decision and you will hear from several loud voices urging you to rip off our masks quickly and immediately. However, those few voices do not represent the majority of the d97 community. Even the petition asking for removal has less than 300 signatures and several of those are from people who do not have children enrolled in d97 and live outside of Oak Park.

At your last board meeting the plan for removing mitigations was thoughtful and kept the whole child in mind. Removing mitigations one at a time with space between. This was very smart. It allowed for time for students and families to adjust and to mentally and emotionally prepare.

One of the toughest things for children during this pandemic has been so much uncertainty and fear. They need clear and consistent guidelines. Sure, I look forward to the day we are done with masks, as does my daughter. But as much as we want it that doesn't mean we are there yet. The CDC told us to remove our masks before and then about 45 days later Delta surge hit and CDC reversed that decision and said put the masks back on. Can you imagine what that will do to young children if we say ok go mask free indoors and then we have to "reach for them again"? I know many want to rush this but for the mental, emotional and physical health of our children I hope that you stick to the well thought-out plan you had discussed at recent board meeting.

At time of writing, I know that d200 chose to go mask optional however high school students and Pre-K to 8 are very different. We should not forget that d97 does have Pre-K included in it and those children are not even eligible for vaccines yet. The masks are their only protection. Also, many d97 have siblings under the age of 5, also not eligible for vaccines. The percentage with younger siblings would be much higher than high school students.

I hope that d97 continues indoor masking until two weeks after spring break and then if the numbers start low, if there isn't an increase then yes let's discuss taking off the masks, but we are not there yet. The decision is up to the local districts.

Thank you for your service and being thoughtful.

Tina Harle

Mom of d97 vaccinated third grader and an unvaccinated (not eligible) 3 year old.

Mask-wearing is not causing any direct harm. However, getting rid of general mask wearing does open up vulnerable immunocompromised D97 faculty, staff and students - and by extension family members like vulnerable grandparents - to risk of infection. Vaccination is great but also is not mandatory at this point. Masking adds a level of protection that is not harmful to anyone but may save some lives still.

Charity Anne Caldwell

D97 parent (and fully vaccinated person whose entire fully vaccinated family just had COVID)

The board has failed and the emergency meeting was an exercise in analysis paralysis, to a textbook degree.

Masks should be optional. Plain and simple. What else is there to "do well" about rolling this out.

This pandemic has made parents and their kids tremendously flexible, adaptable and resilient.

My family does not need special guidance or instruction from the board or schools about how to go about operating in a mask optional world. We will figure it out and I trust other families are perfectly capable of doing the same. It is not that hard.

It's amazing and shocking how we are one of the few districts in the ENTIRE STATE OF ILLINOIS that needs newly three weeks to figure "a plan".

Thank you,
John Chomicz
Parent of Brooks 6th grader

The mask mandate is not the only mitigation that needs to be addressed:

Please start addressing the outdated mitigations mentioned below. Even the most cautious districts around the country have been allowing the following for MONTHS:

Field trips are still banned (except one overnight trip to DC that was permitted).

Parents are still banned from visiting the schools for any reason (except to supervise students eating lunch).

Art shows are still not allowed because that would have parent visitors in the school (even though parents can come to school for a basketball game.)

Masked and vaccinated parents are not allowed to help with teachers for reading groups, art appreciation, class celebrations, etc.

Beth Siegel

I watched the D97 board meeting last week. In that meeting the CDC's previous metrics and thresholds were a primary component of the rationale for the continued high level of COVID mitigations in our schools.

The CDC guidance has now changed, recommending that in Cook County masks should be optional indoors. This change was based on the best data and science, and it produces a provably better predictive metric of future severe outcomes. This change also engenders a realistic switch from trying to control the spread, to limiting severe impact.

If D97 this week ignores CDC guidance, when last week it was holding up the CDC as the gold standard, it will reveal that our D97 leaders just want to pick and choose the guidance that matches their predetermined course of action. This is not 'following the science'.

D97 is increasingly finding itself a lone holdout, ignoring the data that says our kids and teachers are safe, ignoring the expert advice of the CDC and state level health officials, instead clinging to the outdated and impossible goal of 'controlling the spread'.

Everybody at this board table should already know about the dramatic drop in D97 enrollment over the course of the pandemic. Oak Park is not an island. We don't have a better handle on the science and risk than the CDC. If you continue this overzealous approach to COVID mitigations, parents will continue to find alternatives to D97.

Sincerely,
-Josh Vanderberg

Hello Board Members-

I understand that during the emergency board meeting on 2/27/22 the board voted 4-3 against following D200, D90 and the majority of schools in the state of Illinois, and across the nation, by maintaining a mask mandate at D97 schools - board members opined that the removal masks would risk killing people.

To be clear, I just purchased two boxes of KN95s so my main concern isn't that my children need to continue to wear masks in the short-term - if you said they could take their masks off tomorrow I might still tell my kids to wear them. My concern is about how the board is making decisions counter to the recent guidance from the CDC and the Governor of the state of Illinois - how does this board know better?

The complete elimination of risk cannot be the goal. You have tough decisions to make, and the community isn't aligned on this issue, so I understand how difficult this must be. If Oak Park students (despite living in an area with high vaccination rates - a stark contrast from CPS) need to remain masked indefinitely (despite the CDC dropping its recommendation of universal masking in schools) - then the D97 board needs to be clear with members of this community about the goals and metrics that they are making their decisions upon - the threshold that needs to be met and not ambiguous, personal views of the world.

If the goal is to eliminate all risk it raises so many questions - where does this goal of protecting every student at any cost end? Traffic accidents kill people - are there seatbelts on D97 buses? Children are injured on playground equipment - should we remove this equipment to protect children? Childhood obesity and diabetes have a negative impact on quality of life and projected life spans - so should we only offer healthy foods to our students in school? Some children have heart conditions that they aren't aware of that could be lethal - should we cancel all sports and physical fitness in school to eliminate the possibility of a child ever having a sports-related medical emergency? These things could kill people - when is the D97 board going act on these dangers?

Please be clear with the residents of Oak Park why you stand against recommendation of the CDC and against the Democratic Governor of Illinois, why you're better qualified to make this decision than medical professionals, and what goal or metric needs to be met in order for us to join the rest of the country in removing masks.

Thank you for your thoughtful response to this request,

Erin Connor

4. Emergency Discussion

4.1 Review of Mitigations

Dr. Powell begins with, “Why the need for this discussion”. Masking and Vaccinations has become somewhat politicized, and therefore needs to be discussed in this open format so that all those involved, and or effected by the decisions can either weigh in on or hear the path forward. On Friday, the CDC issued new COVID-19 guidance on community transmission levels, including information related to school masking. Governor Pritzker also announced on Friday that he was withdrawing the executive order that required masks in Illinois schools, effective Monday, February 28. The state Superintendent has also indicated that per the orders of the Governor, masks will be optional for all schools and school districts.

At our last meeting, Dr. Wernet provided criteria for removal of mitigations. The Board expressed concerns for our immunocompromised and venerable students and their families. The Board also asked Administration to provide talking points to Parents and Students as we begin to remove mitigations. We have been working to prepare this information and make preparations for Spring Break return. The District will be encouraging testing and provide SHIELD testing upon students return to school after break.

In speaking to Dr. Chapple McGruder, she will be providing correspondence from the health department that will outline guidance on quarantining and isolation. This new information is related to distancing.

Dr. Powell is asking the Board for consensus on masking and although a resolution was passed during a prior Board meeting, that gives the Interim Superintendents, autonomy over the decisions, Dr. Powell believes the Board represents the community appropriately, and is looking for some direction and consensus.

Caroline Roselli, the Districts legal counsel, informed the Board and Community that local schools can continue to have control over universal masking. Regarding the Health Department, I know you are no longer excluding asymptomatic students, if you do go optional, regarding quarantine if you are mask optional, you can strongly recommend masking of those students, days 6-10, but can't require. The District can also, if going mask optional but recommended, mandate masking for younger aged groups of students that are not yet vaccine eligible. These are all decisions that can be made by the local schools.

Board Consensus – Recommend Highly, but Optional Masking tentative dates 3/7 or 3/17

Board Table Poll:

3 Board Members recommend 3/7 as date for shifting to Mask Optional
4 Board Members recommend 3/17 as date for shifting to Mask Optional

In recognizing the CDC changes in guidance, and the impact of those changes on our school community, the Board agrees on March 17, 2022 as the date masking will become highly recommended, but not required.

This date, allows time over the next couple weeks, for Administration to plan, provide parent and student talking points around mask removal, and afford time to communicate with families that need additional supports as we make this shift in district mitigations. As stated by Dr. Morrison at the last Board Meeting, providing children with opportunity to understand and transition to this new normal helps with their social and emotional needs.

5. CONCLUDING ITEMS

5.1 BOARD REMARKS

Board member Moore: Addressing public comment, administration is doing above and beyond and I want to thank them, whether we agree or disagree, we have to respect the work that that is being done daily. I encourage you run for the school board, as I will not be seeking re-election. It's been tough, and I want the community to remember that we still see each other out around town, so please be kind with your comments and remarks.

CONCLUDING
ITEMS

Board member Ross Dribin: I encourage you, as you process this meeting, to understand that we are here for the students, to make sure they receive a good education. Excellence in Education for all students is the goal. This discussion, is one component in that process.

ADJOURNMENT

6. ADJOURNMENT

Kearney moved, seconded by Hurd Johnson that the meeting be adjourned. There being no further business to conduct, President Kim declared the meeting adjourned at 2:52 p.m.

Board President

Board Secretary