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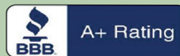
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## Masks coming off in schools? D153, 161 look at court rulings

BY CHRONICLE STAFF

Homewood District 153's school board was considering a switch to a "mask recommended" policy, to try and comply with new court rulings on whether schools can mandate masking. Flossmoor District 161's school board began discussions Feb. 14 to drop the mask mandate.

The decisions revolve around a circuit court judge in Sangamon County ruling Feb. 4 that neither Gov. J.B. Pritzker nor the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) has the power to impose state-wide mask mandates.

An appellate court ruled Feb. 17 mask mandating would no longer be required, although districts could set their own policies. Pritzker said Feb. 18 he would appeal the ruling to the Illinois Supreme Court.

The District 153 board voted to continue a mask mandate at a special Sunday meeting Feb. 6. The board heard from a dozen people. Most urged the board to keep the mask mandate.

Churchill School fifth grader Gabriel Cohn addressed the board, urging a continuation of the mask mandate.

"I personally think we should keep doing what we have been doing ... It should be a no-brainer that the protocols stay in place. (The virus) is affecting countless other people, not just you. Disregarding these measures is how we get mutations, like Omicron. It would be plain foolish to stop now," Gabriel said, adding wearing a mask isn't that difficult and a mask helps to keep him and others safe.

At the board's Feb. 14 meeting, a representative of the teachers' union thanked the board for voting to keep the mask mandate.

The decision to move to recommend masking was made after the Chronicle's deadline.

At District 161's Feb. 14 board meeting, Superintendent Dana Smith opened the conversation with the assertion the district would keep the "safety of students and staff at the forefront" when determining how to move forward. He then put forth a target date of March 14 for potentially allowing students and staff to remove their masks.

According to a document attached to the board's agenda, mask "flexibility" would be accompanied by continued social distancing; continued, if not possibly increased, SHIELD testing; and the Test To Stay program in which close contacts of confirmed cases undergo BinaxNOW testing on days one, three and five to remain in school rather than



Marilyn Thomas/H-F Chronicle  
Gabriel Cohn, a fifth grader at Churchill School, urged the District 153 school board to continue its mask mandate.

quarantining under presumed-positive policies.

Both District 153 and 161, as well as Homewood-Flossmoor High School, are making SHIELD testing available once a week. SHIELD testing is a saliva-based test that can detect COVID-19 and its variants in symptomatic, pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic people.

District 161 board members seemed to support the idea of removing the mask requirement but raised questions about timing and execution. Janelle Scharon expressed concern that flexibility may lead to social friction between students who choose to continue wearing masks and those who choose to remove them. Cameron Nelson called for a "middle ground" approach to transitioning out of the mandate and also questioned what criteria would exist for reinstating mask usage should COVID-19 case numbers rise again in the future, such as after spring break.

The board was set to reconvene Feb. 28 (after the Chronicle's deadline) for a discussion on next steps.

While school mask rules are still in dispute, the state appeared to be on track to lift the general mask mandate in indoor settings on Feb. 28.

On Feb. 9, Pritzker said he was cautiously optimistic that the downward trend in key metrics, especially hospitalizations, would continue.

That seems to be the case. On Jan. 14, the state reported 7,320 people in the hospital with COVID-19. On Feb. 18, the number was down to 1,590.

Locally, case numbers have dropped rapidly. In Homewood, new cases in the past two weeks were down 77% over the previous two-week period. Flossmoor's rate was down 58%.