

## Change in District's Mask Exemption Process

The Northern Board and Administration have done everything in their power to provide Northern families the opportunity to 1) make a personal choice on masks in schools and 2) file exemptions for the reasons provided in the Order by the Acting Secretary of the PA Department of Health.

On Tuesday, August 24th, the Board approved a Health and Safety Plan that allowed families to make their own choice on whether their child wears a mask in school. On Tuesday, August 31, our second day of school, Governor Wolf announced a universal masking mandate to take effect a week later. On the afternoon of Friday, September 3, the last business day before the mandate deadline, the PA Department of Education (PDE) further amended and reissued its guidance. In doing so, PDE further clarified how school district officials must adhere to federal and state laws related to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and IDEA when allowing exemptions. Further, PDE emphasized that failure to do so could result in school officials' loss of sovereign immunity and exposure to lawsuits and personal liability.

Given these conditions, on Thursday, September 16, the District will move forward with an update to our exemption process to ensure we are in compliance with federal law and the face covering order.

The Thursday start date allows families time to consider their educational options and pursue the updated exemption process as appropriate. The updated process will require medical certification in order to claim an exemption from wearing a mask. The previous exemption form that was issued on Saturday, September 4, will no longer be valid after Wednesday, September 15, and will be replaced with the new Section 504/IDEA Exemption Form available on the District COVID webpage.

### UPDATED MASK EXEMPTION PROCESS

In order to request an exemption to the mask order, Parents/Guardians must:

1. Submit a completed Section 504/IDEA Mask Exemption Request Form to your building principal.
  - a. Please note that available medical records should be submitted along with the 504/IDEA Form. This will enable a multidisciplinary team to determine whether an accommodation is appropriate for your child.
  - b. Each 504/IDEA Form and accompanying records will be reviewed and responded to within five (5) school days.
  - c. Section 504 and IDEA exemptions granted last year (2020-21 school year) will continue to be honored, and a new form does not need to be submitted at this time.

On Thursday, all students who have not applied for and received a medical exception will be expected to comply with the mask mandate within the framework below. If a student is not wearing a mask when they are supposed to, the following procedures will be implemented:

- For Sept. 16: Students will be reminded to wear a mask. A supply of masks will be

available in each building.

- For Sept. 17 and beyond:

- o First Incident: The principal will meet with the student and offer the student a mask. The principal will conference with the student, and a written notice will be given to the student to take home to inform the student's parent/guardian. The principal will attempt to contact the parents.

- o Subsequent Incidents: Principals will address the situations according to the building's disciplinary practices.

Families in the process of acquiring the necessary medical certification for a mask exemption that need more time beyond Thursday must show proof of a scheduled doctor's appointment to their child's principal.

In the event the Acting Secretary of the Department of Health lifts the mandate or a court intervenes with an injunction (there is currently one filed to be heard next week), we will refer back to and review our practices as articulated in our Health and Safety Plan. We realize that change is always difficult, so please know that it is our commitment to work with our families through this time and help with the transition in every way possible. We have successfully navigated the challenges of the pandemic thus far, and we will continue to do so because we are resilient, and We Are Northern!