

Rachael Banks, Public Health Director
State of Oregon

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, Public Health Officer & State Epidemiologist
State of Oregon

February 21, 2022

Dear Ms. Banks and Dr. Sidelinger:

First of all, let us start by thanking you for your thoughtful and courageous guidance during the past two years, helping us navigate these unprecedented challenges of the pandemic. We are grateful for your leadership in keeping students, staff, and our communities safe. As you are well aware, we have all sought your guidance and feedback about how to best serve our students and families during these difficult times. As educational leaders in Central Oregon, we do not take the impact of COVID lightly.

As the school district and education service district superintendents from Crook, Deschutes, Harney, and Jefferson Counties, we are writing to request that school districts be afforded the opportunity to take on the responsibility of mask guidance at the same time as our communities. If OHA releases the community portion of the state mask mandate earlier than the established March 31st cutoff, we respectfully request for school districts to align with this change, rather than waiting until March 31st, as currently established.

Throughout this pandemic, our experience has been that K-12 guidance has always aligned with OHA and LPHA guidelines. We are asking you to consider continuing that now, as well. The reality is that being out of sync with the rest of our respective communities (assuming they are able to end the community mandate before 3/31) will be a tremendous hardship for our staff and could likely lead to some very challenging working conditions during this transition period.

Specifically, there are reasons to believe that disruptions, protests and challenging behaviors may arise at our schools, as they have in Deschutes County and across the state. We anticipate that some percentage of our families will just hold their students out of school during this time. It is likely that older students will refuse to wear masks and protest rather than attending classes (especially given that no one else in the community will be required to wear them at that time). We also may have parents of elementary students escort their students into school without masks in defiance of the state rule. The burden of these challenges will be carried on the backs of our staff and will likely make it difficult to continue with in-person instruction for the remainder of March.

Our primary interest in writing this letter is to decrease disruptions and challenges to student learning, as we anticipate this to be likely. In this request, we hope to minimize potential for disruptions and to continue in-person instruction for all of our students and establish a smooth transition for the remainder of the school year.

For the record, this written request is specifically to ensure that our position is clearly articulated and not perceived as an opportunity to grandstand or push back. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have regarding this issue. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Paul Andrews, Superintendent
High Desert ESD

Charan Cline, Superintendent
Redmond School District

Steve Cook, Superintendent
Bend-La Pine Schools

Shannon Criss, Superintendent
Harney County ESD

Stefanie Garber, Superintendent
Culver School District

Matthew Hawley, Superintendent
Harney County District #4
Harney Union High School District 1J

Sara Johnson, Superintendent
Crook County School District

Jay Mathisen, Superintendent
Jefferson County School District 509J

Shay Mikalson, Superintendent
Jefferson County ESD

Steve Quick, Superintendent
Harney County District #3

Curtiss Scholl, Superintendent
Sisters School District