

HARRISON TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT

120 N. Main Street
Mallica Hill, NJ 08062

Phone: (856) 478-2016 Fax: (856) 418-1619

Margaret Q. Peretti, Ed.D.
Superintendent of School

Robert Scharf
Business Administrator

Lisa Herman
Chief Academic Officer

AnnaLisa Bodans
Harrison Elementary Principal

Lois Hynes
Supervisor of Student Services

Jennifer Hackett-Sloman
Pleasant Valley Principal

Chad Flexen
Harrison Elementary Supervisor of Instruction



Christine Fellona
Pleasant Valley Assistant Principal

To: The Office of the Governor
From: Board of Education, Harrison Township Schools (Gloucester County)
Date: August 26, 2021
Re: Mask Mandate - NJ Public Schools

The Harrison School District is a high performing Kindergarten through Sixth Grade School District in Gloucester County, NJ. On Monday, August 23, 2021, The Harrison Township Board of Education met for the monthly public meeting. The 9 elected members of the Board of Education conducted regular monthly school business in the presence of a large group of parents and community members who attended and participated in the meeting, according to the rights of the public under the Open Public Meetings Act, both in person and virtually.

During both the first and second audience participation, various members of the public spoke on the agenda item that requested BOE action on the required amendments to the "Safe Return Plan". Prior to the latest direction from the Governor's Office on August 6, 2021 in EQ251, the Harrison Township School District's "Safe Return Plan" allowed for **parental choice** in masking for the start of the 2021-2022 school year. While our school, like most in the state, services children of parents who feel very strongly about both sides of the debate centered around the requirement of universal masking in the elementary school setting, the majority of those community members who chose to participate in this most recent meeting communicated that they are passionately AGAINST the masking requirement for all children. These members of the public communicated that they would rather parents have individual choice about whether to mask their children for the 7 hour elementary school day. Concerns that were raised by this group of community members, while extensive, could be summarized under the following general concerns:

1. State officials NOT providing evidence of the actual effectiveness of masks in reducing the spread of virus
2. State officials NOT providing peer reviewed studies on the long term overall effects of masking elementary aged children for 7 consecutive hours per day
3. The educational effects of face covering during instruction, specifically in fundamental areas such as phonics, speech development, and fluency in reading
4. The social effects of face covering during the school day including proper peer interaction, body language and the reading of important facial cues for elementary aged children
5. Potential immediate health risks of long term masking for the elementary age student (overall cleanliness, allowing for appropriate breathing, etc)

Throughout the summer, the administration has also heard from some parents in SUPPORT of the universal masking of all children to ensure what they believe to be the most benefit in the reduction of the spread of virus in the public school setting. Parents of immunocompromised students have communicated their desire for all children to be masked for the safety of their children and also have shared that they do not want their children to be singled out by other kids because of them exercising their choice to mask their children if masking was made optional. As directed by the governor, a parental survey was conducted in June 2021 to gather data on the topic of universal masking. 52.4% of those who responded were in support of universal masking in our schools.

Like every school district, The Harrison Township Board of Education recognizes that there are passionate constituents on both sides of this issue. However, what the Board also recognizes is that all

parents who have chosen to speak up about the mask mandate are communicating and advocating for what they believe is in the best interest of their children. The Harrison Township Board of Education is requesting that the Governor's Office and the NJ State Department of Health help us in handling this debate by releasing clear guidance to the public as to the scientific data which drove your decision to implement universal masking in schools. The release of this information to all parents and residents of the State of NJ would assist local school districts in communicating with the public so that our efforts, as educational officials, can be refocused on the daunting responsibility of planning for the 2021-2022 academic school year.

Thank you,

Stacey Muscarella, Harrison Township BOE President
Theresa Vaites, Harrison Township BOE Vice President
Jennifer Bowen, Harrison Township BOE member
Walter Bright, Harrison Township BOE member
Cristie Clark, Harrison Township BOE member
Janette Coslop, Harrison Township BOE member
Sean Henderson, Harrison Township BOE member
Marissa Straccialini, Harrison Township BOE member
Shannon Williams, Harrison Township BOE member