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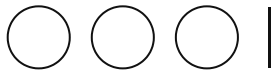
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BAY AREA // HEALTH

COVID shots are under way for young kids. So when will California end its school mask mandate?

Erin Allday, Jill Tucker

Updated: Nov. 8, 2021 8:25 a.m.



State health officials have not said when kids, such as these at Malcolm X Academy, can stop wearing masks at school.

Santiago Meia / The Chronicle

Federal approval of [vaccines for 5- to 11-year-olds](#) last week marked a turning point in the pandemic, with all school-aged children now able to get the shots.

But it also sparked what has become an urgent, and potentially divisive, question among many parents: How much longer are kids going to have to wear masks at school?

The short answer: for a while yet. The school mask mandate is a state order, and California public health officials will only say that it's in place indefinitely.

But [as more young children get shots](#) — in certain places, more than 90% of older children and teens are vaccinated — some parents, kids and even doctors are starting to push back on mandatory face coverings. Or, at least, they want some guidance on when, and under what conditions, masks can be lifted.

In the same way that Bay Area counties last month unveiled criteria for [lifting indoor mask mandates](#) for the general public — including low community disease transmission, stable hospital rates and at least 80% of all residents vaccinated — they want to know what goalposts schools and communities must reach in order for masks to come off.

“I want off-ramps ASAP,” said parent Rebecca Bodenheimer, whose son attends a private school in Oakland, saying she doesn't see the health benefit of forcing kids to wear them without specific guidelines. “It's time to really talk about taking the masks off.”

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State officials refuse to say what such “off-ramps” might look like. They responded to questions about when the mandate might be lifted, or revised, by referring to an [Oct. 20 statement](#) affirming that the rule would stay in place for now.

When California schools resumed classes in August and September — in many districts, for the first time since March 2020 — masks were considered key to safely reopening. They would not only protect children who hadn’t been vaccinated from potentially serious illness, but also keep them from getting sick at all and having to miss more class — or bringing the virus home.

And so far, the reopening of schools has been a success, at least as far as keeping children in classrooms. According to the state, California schools educate 12% of U.S. children but have only made up 1% of all COVID-related closures nationwide.

Perhaps in large part due to that success, the state likely won’t revisit masks until at least early next year, at which point parents of 5- to 11-year-olds will have had plenty of opportunity to vaccinate their kids, and California will have made it through what could be a dangerous winter if COVID surges again.

It remains to be seen how many parents will vaccinate their kids, and if uptake is low, whether that will prolong masking in schools. Gov. Gavin Newsom has announced that all K-12 students will be required to get vaccinated once the shots

win full federal approval.

Beyond waiting through the winter, experts have wide-ranging thoughts on when it might be appropriate to take masks off in schools. Some say they'd feel comfortable dropping mandates at individual schools once a high percentage — say 80% or 90% — of students and staff are vaccinated. More lenient types say masks should be lifted in a couple of months, as soon as the elementary school children have had a chance to be vaccinated.

Others say they wouldn't support lifting mandates until countywide vaccination rates get to 90% or higher and local case rates are substantially lower — metrics that could take six months or longer to meet. “We have a really long way to get there,” said Dr. Anne Liu, a Stanford pediatrician and infectious disease expert.

One of the main drivers of school mask mandates is uncertainty over how much children drive coronavirus rates. Children are not as vulnerable to serious illness from COVID as adults. But traditionally, schools are a major source of transmission for diseases like colds, flu and norovirus; they could also spawn coronavirus outbreaks that fuel community spread, even if children are vaccinated.

“As someone who has watched how easily colds, flus and stomach flus circulate among table groups, then grade levels, then the entire school, and as someone who has gotten sick so many times, I personally wouldn't mind if the mask mandate continued for as long as I'm a teacher,” said San Francisco teacher Liz McAvoy. “That said, it is hard to teach all day wearing a mask and I see how one might find it limiting and frustrating to wear if, on balance, there is no reasonable threat.”

Even experts who believe masks should remain for many more months say it's probably appropriate to start planning to loosen mandates, but some want it to happen sooner than later.

Last week, two UCSF doctors [penned a letter to state officials](#) demanding a public plan for when masks can come off, saying California schoolchildren face among the strictest pandemic rules in the nation.

Now that the last group of school-aged children is eligible for vaccines, it “seems unfair” to not give kids and parents some hope that they can take their masks off, said Dr. Jeanne Noble, director of the COVID response at UCSF’s emergency

department, who co-wrote the letter with Dr. Monica Gandhi, an infectious disease expert.

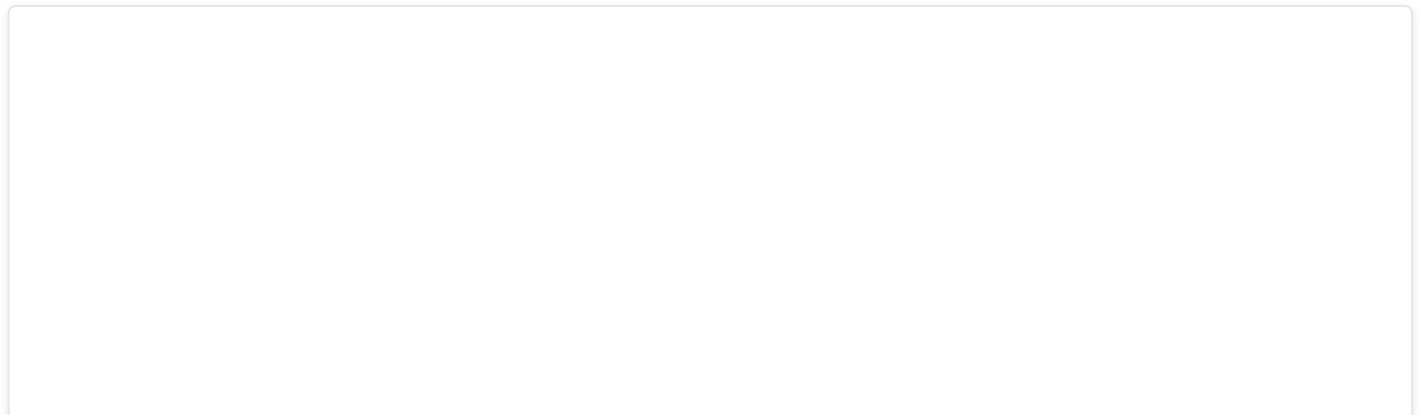
“All of this comes to seem rather absurd,” she said. “Kids will be the last ones to have their restrictions lifted even though they are least at risk.”

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Noble and Gandhi are working with a statewide parent group called CA Parent Power and founded by Oakland mom Megan Bacigalupi. She said she's not anti-mask, but they are a nuisance at best and can make learning more difficult. And like Noble, she's bothered by what she sees as contradictory messaging around face coverings.

Why, for example, do tens of thousands of 49ers fan get to take their masks off in the stands, while her third-grader must cover his face for seven hours at school every day, even while playing four-square outside at recess? "Tell us why schools are different," Bacigalupi said.

Mask-wearing outdoors at schools is a particular source of aggravation for some parents. The state doesn't require children wear masks at recess or during outdoor physical education, but many schools make children keep them on anyway.

Dr. Lee Atkinson-McEvoy, a UCSF pediatrician who supports keeping masks in place in schools for the time being, said she understands parents' and kids' frustrations. She questions, though, just how difficult mask-wearing is for kids.

“Parents have these strong opinions about their kids being masked in school,” Atkinson-McEvoy added. “But children have adapted really easily to having a mask on all day in school.”

But Berkeley High sophomore Caden Winslow considers masks “pretty annoying.”

They are uncomfortable, make acne worse and cause friction on the face, he said. It’s hard to be social and easier for people to hide behind a mask, he said. It’s also more difficult to remember people’s names without seeing their faces.

Still, he gets why they may be necessary. He finds them especially annoying when he’s playing sports. But at the same time, the Berkeley High basketball team — which he’s on — has had COVID outbreaks. “Me, personally, I understand why we still have to wear masks,” he said.

But he’d like there to be guidelines on when they could take them off.

“I don’t see a public health benefit in keeping kids in masks forever,” said Oakland parent Bodenheimer. “Yeah, have metrics. If they have to go back on temporarily, fine, but at the moment it feels like it’s endless.”

Erin Allday and Jill Tucker are San Francisco Chronicle staff writers. Email: eallday@sfchronicle.com, jtucker@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@erinallday](https://twitter.com/erinallday), [@jilltucker](https://twitter.com/jilltucker)



Written By
Erin Allday

Reach Erin on

Erin Allday is a health reporter who writes about infectious diseases, stem cells, neuroscience and consumer health topics like fitness and nutrition. She's been on the health beat since 2006 (minus a nine-month stint covering Mayor Gavin Newsom). Before joining The Chronicle, Erin worked at newspapers all over the Bay Area and covered a little of everything, including business and technology, city government, and education. She

was part of a reporting team that won a Polk Award for regional reporting in 2005, for a series of stories on outsourcing jobs from Santa Rosa to Penang, Malaysia. Erin started her journalism career at the Daily Californian student newspaper and many years later still calls Berkeley her home.



Written By

Jill Tucker

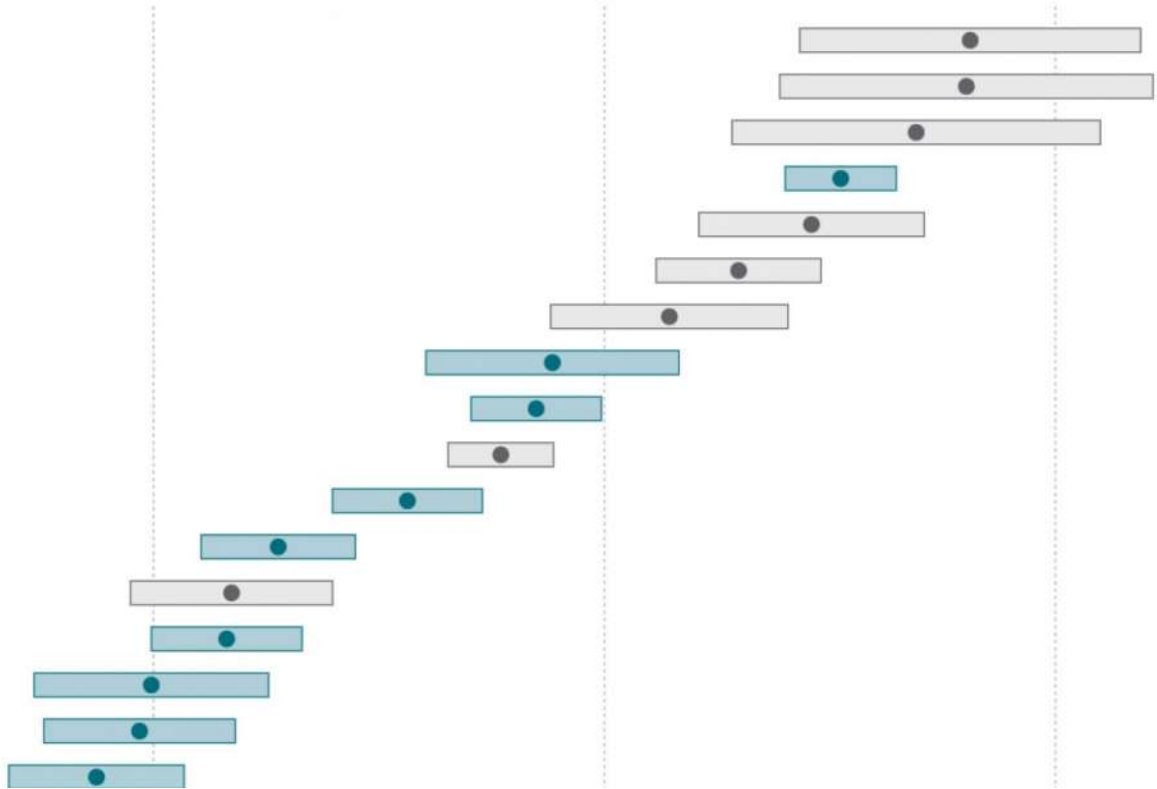
Reach Jill on

Jill Tucker has covered education in California for 22 years, writing stories that range from issues facing Bay Area school districts to broader national policy debates. Her work has generated changes to state law and spurred political and community action to address local needs.

She is a frequent guest on KQED's "Newroom" television show and "Forum" radio show. A Bay Area native, Jill earned a master's degree in journalism at the University of Colorado, Boulder and a bachelor's degree from the UC Santa Barbara. In between, she spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in Cape Verde, West Africa.

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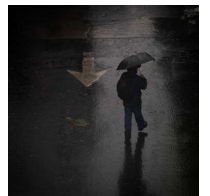


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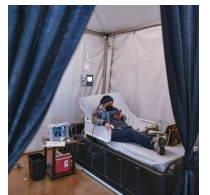
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BY CATHERINE HO



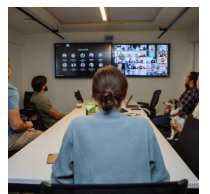
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BY EFFIE SEIBERG



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