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School Board split on removing mask mandate

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

After a tie vote on eliminating its mask requirement, the Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) Board agreed to consider doing away with the requirement at its next meeting.

At the School Board's February 17 meeting, Superintendent Annette Freiheit brought forward the proposed shift on behalf of the district team that works to manage WAPS' pandemic response, the incident command team. She said cases have been trending downward in the district. WAPS is not contributing to community transmission, she said, and many district cases are the result of household contact, not people catching the virus at school. There is no evidence of community transmission from spectators at district events, she added.

Some School Board members said the change would be premature. School Board member Karl Sonneman said case numbers remain too high to consider a masking policy change. "If you look at what is happening, the numbers are still, I'd call it terrible, but a very high range ... It's admittedly gone much worse, and is coming down, but down is not yet down to where it's safe or where we should be," he said.

"I oppose it," School Board member Steve Schild said. "I think it's too early."

In contrast, School Board member Jim Schul said he supported making masks optional due to vaccines being available and students' educational needs. "I've said for quite some time, the vaccine is a game changer on this front. But my rationale is a pedagogical one. I'm deeply concerned about the social ... development of students. And these masks are a hindrance to that," he said.

School Board Chair Nancy Denzer also mentioned staff concerns. She said she thought about staff feedback the board has gotten on the day-to-day hardships of ensuring students are masked. "So I'm not sure who we're kidding here by saying we're going to continue to have a policy that we have no effective way to manage," she said. She added that she feels students are ready to move on. "I believe it's time to change what we're doing. And if it's a choice, I think we're going to see kids and staff who are going to continue to wear masks because it's right for them," she said.

Freiheit said building administrators and teachers would do their best to make sure students who test positive for COVID isolate for five days and come back to school wearing a mask on days six through 10 following their test.

From February 10-16, WAPS had 16 cases, much lower than the high this school year of 135 between January 6 and 12 and down from 24 the week of February 3-9, but on par with the highest rates seen last fall and early winter. In Winona County as a whole, there were 169 new cases last week, a decrease from 284 the week before, though the community transmission remained high, at 361 per 100,000, according to the Winona County COVID dashboard. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Minnesota Department of Health recommend masking in schools. For School Board member Tina Lehnertz,

her willingness to support the proposed policy shift came from masks not being required in many places and because it came from the incident command team. However, she noted that she will continue following COVID protocols. "I will continue to wear my mask. I'm fully vaccinated. I have three grandchildren who cannot be vaccinated at this time, and I don't want to be that person that passes something on to them," she said.

Similarly to Lehnertz, Schul said the proposal coming from the incident command team contributed to his support. He said that to not support a recommendation from the team would go against past practice. He later added that in the past, when the incident command team recommended continuing the masking requirement and he did not agree, he did not go against it. "I didn't try to obstruct when I didn't agree, because I trusted the incident command team," he said. "That's what we've been doing all along. This is a hard matter. We're in a pandemic. So trusting the incident command team only when we agree with it is no trust at all. I trust the incident command team."

Schild disagreed. "If I can't or anybody else can't disagree with another adult without being accused of something along the lines of mistrust, then I think we're in a place where I certainly don't want to be," Schild said.

Schild and Sonneman also said they were worried about transmission at athletic events. Freiheit said it is strongly recommended that players on the sidelines and coaches wear masks. "When I go to games now, I'm really disappointed how little masking I see," Sonneman said. "And it starts right there at the bench with the coaches." Schild said he felt it was a good example of what happens when a policy makes something optional.

The short time between finding out on the day of the School Board meeting that the policy change would be on the table that evening and having to quickly decide on it that night also concerned Sonneman and Schild, and School Board member Michael Hanratty said he would support it being voted on at the next meeting. Typically, the board sees information once before voting on it at the next meeting. Denzer said the district team managing WAPS' COVID protocols meets every Thursday, which is also the day the board meets.

"It's a very complex subject, and to give it proper consideration really required more time than we had," Sonneman said. He moved to table the matter.

In a tie vote, School Board members did not go forward with tabling the topic. Sonneman, Schild and Hanratty voted in support of tabling, and Schul and Lehnertz, in addition to Denzer, voted against it.

A motion to remove the masking requirement did not pass in a tie vote with Hanratty, Sonneman and Schild voting no and Lehnertz, Schul and Denzer voting yes.

A motion to have the policy on the agenda at the next meeting did pass 4-2 with Sonneman and Schild voting no.

The School Board will next meet at Winona Senior High School on Thursday, March 3, at 6 p.m.

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