

West Branch Area School District

September 6, 2021

Good Evening:

This communication serves as a follow-up regarding the new masking order that takes effect officially tomorrow – Tuesday, September 7, 2021. As was previously communicated to you last week, after consultation with legal counsel, West Branch will be complying with the masking order. While the District appreciates the many and varied views on this issue, we find ourselves situated between two very distinctly divided groups. However, we are steadfast in our goal to keep students in school. Our ability to provide a strong educational opportunity is greatly impacted by us being able to maintain in-person instruction.

With the implementation of the masking order, all students and employees must be masked while in school and participating in other school activities with the exception of outdoor instruction, recess, engaged in play for athletics, and while eating. Masking breaks of 15-minutes each will be provided for all students and employees throughout the school day. We are aware that we will have students who do not comply with the order tomorrow and under no circumstance will any student be forced to wear a mask. With that being said though, simply ignoring non-compliance by students results in non-compliance by the District. Students will not have the option to choose masking for part of the day and choose unmasking for other parts of the day for instruction and other school activities. Because we have parents with two different sets of expectations, having the two groups of students together is not a viable option. We will be restructuring our instructional delivery to have students grouped accordingly. We will be making use of our classrooms and the same repurposed areas that we have used to work with students throughout the entire pandemic. All students will still be assigned to professional staff members. All students with disabilities will be provided with the support of a properly certified teacher. As long as the situation is manageable, and students comply, we will be able to remain open for in-person instruction after a short period of transition tomorrow.

We have received questions regarding a masking exemption. Upon receipt of a medical authorization, the district will process your request. As per PDE guidance, we are following our formal process used to provide accommodations for students with protected needs. This should not be confused with a disability as it is a different process. While there are various means to collect this authorization (note, order, prescription, form), we have confirmed that our plan is consistent with our neighboring districts. Students with an approved mask exemption will not see a change to their schedule.

The District is aware of possible protests scheduled to be held at the school. The district supports the rights of individuals to peacefully protest and has arranged to accommodate both a student protest and a parent/community member protest should they occur. No protest where individuals are exercising their right of free speech may interfere with the operation of

school. As such, both the student protest and parent protest will have designated areas that will not impede our operation. Further, parents/community members may not join any student-initiated protest on school property in accordance with district safety measures.

1. Parent/Community Members wishing to protest may do so at the parking lot adjacent to the softball field on the far side of the football stadium. Those participating should park in that area. If protestors wish to congregate in a different location, it will need to be off school property. Please keep in mind that protesting by adults outside of the school can be a frightening experience for students and employees alike. We respectfully request you use the designated area or do not protest during school hours or during other school events.
2. Students wishing to protest before or after school may do so on the sidewalk at the Rotunda entrance. Students are cautioned to stay off of the driveway/parking lot due to the arrival/departure of employees, students and school vehicles. Students are expected to report for class when the instructional day begins.
3. The District is further aware of plans for a “silent” protest with student absences and will adjust plans accordingly. The District reminds parents that after three (3) consecutive days of absence, a doctor’s excuse will be required.

Moving forward, please be advised that future COVID parent communications will be provided via email and the District website. Any parent having a problem accessing communications may reach out to the school for a copy or assistance.

It is our hope that we all can find a way to move past this latest change and keep our doors open for in-person instruction. Our students and staff enjoy their time together here at the school regardless of mitigation measures. I would remind you that we successfully completed the 2020-2021 school year masked and I am confident we can do it as needed this school year. We recognize that it has certainly been a challenging and frustrating time for all of us both at home and at school. In keeping with our educational mission and values, the health and safety of our students and staff remains our first priority.

Micki Dutrow