

Department of Health Mask Order: Frequently Asked Questions

On Tuesday, August 31, 2021 the Pennsylvania Department of Health issued an Order for universal masking which “applies to all children/students, teachers, staff, and visitors ages two years or older while indoors working, attending, or visiting a school entity, regardless of vaccination status.” This Order takes effect on Tuesday, September 7, 2021 when schools reopen after the Labor Day holiday.

Did Octorara make this decision?

No. The Pennsylvania Acting Secretary of Health, Alison V. Beam, issued this order.

What will school look like this week?

School at Octorara will look exactly as it did last week, but masks will be required.

What about local control and Octorara’s right to create its own Health and Safety plan?

Over the summer, school districts across the Commonwealth were informed that COVID response plans would be a local decision. With this in mind, the Octorara Board of School Directors approved a Health and Safety Plan on August 17th that exercised local control over masking and acknowledged two remaining mandates: masking on school buses per the order from the Transportation Security Administration and reporting of COVID-19 cases that occur on our school campus per Public Health Law.

Octorara’s plan started with specific measures in place that would be adjusted if conditions warranted. Although we opened schools with “masks recommended” we reserved the right to require staff, students, and visitors to wear masks indoors if an outbreak of COVID-19 and/or an excessive number of students in quarantine and isolation interfered with the continuity of education in any school building.

How does the Department of Health’s Order impact Octorara’s current Health and Safety Plan which recommended, not required, masking?

The Department of Health’s order supersedes the Health and Safety Plan Octorara approved on August 17th. The Pennsylvania Department of Education states, “Regardless of whether the Acting Secretary’s August 31, 2021 Order is reflected in a school entity’s Health and Safety Plan, all school entities must comply with and enforce the Order.”

We respect that some members of our school community have questioned the legality of the Order of the Secretary of Health. The question over whether or not Secretary Beam’s Order is,

or is not, lawful is for the courts to decide. Our elected officials will have the opportunity to address the concerns of our school community either through the legislative or judicial process. We encourage you to contact your local representative and review the FAQ document created by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

[PDE Masking Order Resource Site](#)

What if I send my child to school without a mask?

Your help is needed to create an atmosphere of cooperation among the student body to protect Octorara's in-person learning program. A positive and productive school culture is important to everyone. We ask that parents and guardians work collaboratively with teachers and administrators to support their child's education.

Octorara will provide masks or face shields to any child who does not have one. As we did last year, we will implement frequent mask breaks, find ways to increase outside time for students, and keep students focused on learning.

The Department of Health's Order also includes exceptions to the mask wearing requirement. We encourage parents/guardians to review [Section 3 of the Order](#) and contact Mr. Cale Hilbolt, Student Services Director, at chilbolt@octorara.org to discuss how these exceptions might apply to their child's situation.

How will staff enforce the Department of Health's Mask Order?

Staff will offer reminders to students who forget and provide masks for students without them. Administrators have no desire or plan to discipline students over mask wearing. We respect that parents do not want the school to be confrontational, and we promise to balance honoring those wishes with maintaining a positive school culture.

We ask that parents talk to their children about mask-wearing and the importance of cooperating with staff and administrators. If we are unable to encourage your child to comply, you will be asked to come in for a parent conference to develop an immediate plan to support your child's education. Such a plan could include wearing a face shield instead of a mask, transferring to the Virtual Academy, participating in Homeschool, or creating a 504 Plan for your child so he or she can be exempt from wearing a mask. Administration will expect a resolution before the end of the school day to provide continuity of education for your child.

If I disagree with mask wearing, what are my options for educating my child?

Octorara recognizes there are strong opinions about mask wearing. Some parents have stated that they plan to withdraw their children from Octorara if a masking requirement is implemented. Others have shared the opposite view. While we certainly encourage parents to continue sending their children to in-person school at Octorara while wearing a mask, we understand some will want to explore education alternatives because of their disagreement with the Department of Health's authority. There are a number of options for parents to satisfy compulsory attendance requirements:

OCTORARA VIRTUAL ACADEMY

Octorara's Virtual Academy (OVA) is available to students in grades K-12. This is an entirely online, asynchronous program facilitated by Octorara staff. Many Octorara parents selected this option last year. If interested in OVA, please click on the link below to complete the registration form: [Octorara Virtual Academy / Home](#)

HOMESCHOOLING

Homeschooling is an option for parents provided certain conditions are met. For more information about homeschooling please contact Mrs. Jill Hardy @ jhardy@octorara.org.

Is Octorara advocating for local control?

The Octorara Area School District will do its due diligence to determine if local control over its Health and Safety Plan can be reinstated. We acknowledge and respect that there is disagreement over the legality of the Secretary of Health's Order. However, unless a court issues an injunction against the Secretary of Health regarding the implementation and enforcement of the Secretary's Mask Order, Octorara is obligated to comply with the provisions of that Order.

It is clear that our school community cares deeply about its children and only wants what is best for them. We acknowledge that everyone is tired of the endless COVID mitigation procedures and mandates. We further recognize that many are upset that local control has been diminished while others welcome the latest mandate from the Department of the Health. We thank you for your continued flexibility and appreciate your willingness to work with staff and administration, even if disagreements persist.