

New York to lift statewide school mask mandate by March 2

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Students wearing masks leave the New Explorations into Science, Technology and Math (NEST+m) school in the Lower East Side neighborhood of Manhattan, Dec. 21, 2021, in New York. New York City public school students will be allowed to remove their masks outside starting next week but must keep them on indoors for now. Schools Chancellor David Banks announced the new policy in a news release Friday, Feb. 25, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Brittainy Newman, File

New York's statewide masking requirement in schools will be lifted by March 2, Gov. Kathy Hochul said Sunday, citing a dramatic drop in COVID-19 infections and new federal guidelines.

Hours later, New York City Mayor Eric Adams said he's considering lifting vaccine mandates on restaurants, bars and theaters by early next week if infections and hospitalizations continue their downward trend.

A mask mandate on the city's approximately 1 million schoolchildren could also be lifted, Adams said in a statement. The decision won't come until Friday, following a full week of classes after students in the country's largest school system return from a weeklong vacation, he said.

The pair of announcements signaled an important turning point for the city and state, once an epicenter of the global pandemic.

"The day has come," Hochul said at a press conference in Albany.

[New guidance](#) from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says most Americans [can now safely take a break from wearing masks](#), including students in schools.

"That is why I feel very confident that this is the time to lift the mask requirements," Hochul said.

As of Saturday, state officials said the 7-day average for new cases was fewer than 1,671 for the first time since late July. Other metrics have also fallen rapidly, including hospitalizations and deaths.



Teachers line up their students before entering PS 179 elementary school in the Kensington neighborhood, Sept. 29, 2020, in the Brooklyn borough of New York. New York City public school students will be allowed to remove their masks outside starting next week but must keep them on indoors for now. Schools Chancellor David Banks announced the new policy in a news release Friday, Feb. 25, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File

The CDC guidelines for other indoor spaces aren't binding, meaning cities and institutions even in areas of low risk may set their own rules. Hochul said counties and cities could keep their own mandates in place, and parents could still choose to send their kids to school in masks.

The new rules also apply to children 2 years and older in childcare facilities.

Hochul said Adams was consulted before her announcement, including a conversation earlier Sunday.

Despite criticism over the state's pandemic measures, Hochul said she remained resolute in sticking with experts and health data as her guide and "not let criticism and politics intervene in this decision-making."

Earlier this month, Hochul let a broad mask mandate for most indoor settings expire, but said the schools requirement would remain in place. She had promised to revisit the schools question by the first week of March.

The broad mask mandate was implemented during a COVID-19 surge fueled by the omicron variant in December.

Masks are still required in some places, including public transit, homeless shelters, jails and prisons, adult care facilities and healthcare settings.



New York Governor Kathy Hochul speaks during the New York State Democratic Convention in New York, Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Seth Wenig

Andrew Rigie, executive director of the NYC Hospitality Alliance, said lifting the vaccine requirements would be a positive step for restaurants, bars and theaters.

"We need to continue to be smart and safe, and also modify mandates as COVID risks are reduced. So this will be welcome news to many restaurants and bars, although I wouldn't be surprised if some businesses want to voluntarily keep it in place." Andrew Rigie, executive director, NYC Hospitality Alliance, said in a text message to The Associate Press.

The mayor has been hoping to begin lifting restrictions, but said his decisions, like those of the governor, would be influenced by key metrics.

"New York City's numbers continue to go down day after day," Adams said. "So as long as COVID indicators show a low level of risk and we see no surprises this week, on Monday, March 7 we will also lift Key2NYC requirements," he said.

The Key2NYC program was put in place last August to put pressure on New Yorkers to get vaccinated—or risk losing their access to many of the city's attractions like museums and theaters, as well as being shut out of restaurants and bars.

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