Medical Xpress

California to require face masks at schools this fall

July 10 2021, by Jocelyn Gecker

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California will require that masks be worn at schools when classrooms open this fall, despite new guidance issued Friday from the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention that says vaccinated teachers and students don't need to wear face coverings inside school buildings.

Ahead of new school guidelines expected next week, health officials in California said Friday that requiring face coverings will allow all schools to reopen this fall for full in-person instruction.

California Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Mark Ghaly said that not all schools can accommodate physical distancing of at least 3 feet or more, so the best preventive measure is wearing masks indoors.

The California Department of Public Health said in a statement that the mask requirement "also will ensure that all kids are treated the same," without any stigma attached to those who are vaccinated or unvaccinated.

"We believe that with masking and with testing, we can get kids back to in person 100% in our schools," Ghaly said.

Ghaly noted the CDC guidance released Friday says that when it is not possible to maintain at least 3 feet of physical distance, "it is especially important to layer multiple other prevention strategies, such as indoor masking."

The health department plans to release more detailed guidance for school reopening next week, said Ghaly, who joined Gov. Gavin Newsom at a Napa Valley elementary school to sign a bill that provides record funding for California schools.

Newsom invited a group of young students to help him sign the legislation, which directs how most of the $123.9 billion for K-12 education in the 2021-2022 fiscal year must be spent.

As part of a broad new education spending package made possible by the state's surprise budget surplus, the state's two-year kindergarten program will be expanded to include all 4-year-olds for free. The program aims to phase in the expansion by 2025 at a cost of $2.7 billion per year.

The new plan also puts more money toward after school and summer school programs, particularly in districts that serve many high-needs students.

"This is a transformational budget. This is unlike anything we have ever done in this state," Newsom said.

This year's budget also adds money to fund free school meals for all students, with $54 million allocated for this year and $650 million in future years.

Newsom's kindergarten expansion fulfills a promise that he and Democratic legislative leaders made to foot the bill for universal 4-year-old kindergarten statewide.

Currently, there are about 91,000 4-year-olds enrolled in transitional kindergarten. The new plan would boost enrollment to about 250,000.

The bill achieves many longtime priorities for Democrats in the Legislature, said Democratic Assemblywoman Cecilia Aguiar-Curry, who joined the signing ceremony.

"We are changing lives," said Aguiar-Curry, of Winters. "By the signing of this today, we're not going to leave anyone behind."

Newsom has said the funding aims to address many of the inequities that the coronavirus pandemic exposed, including the need for robust mental health services to address childhood depression and trauma, more

teachers and lower teacher-student ratios.

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Citation: California to require face masks at schools this fall (2021, July 10) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-07-california-require-masks-schools-fall.html

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