



Protesters gather outside the Union County School Board's monthly meetings on mask policy. (Courtesy photo)

REGIONAL NEWS

COVID-19 Cases Decrease in a Mask-Optional North Carolina School System

By [Matt McGregor](#) | October 13, 2021 Updated: October 13, 2021

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One of the few public-school systems in [North Carolina](#) that has stood its ground on keeping masks optional, despite a legal threat from the state, has seen a decrease in COVID-19 cases.

The COVID-19 [dashboard](#) for the Union County Public Schools (UCPS) reported 170 positive cases last Friday, down from 252 the previous week, and down from 479 in the second week of September.

There are 53 schools, 41,500 students, and 5,100 employees in the school system.

The Union County Board of Education voted to keep masks optional in July, and since, has faced heated criticism.

In its [meeting](#) last week, the board voted 7–2 to remain mask-optional.

Senate Bill 654 requires that each school district revisit its masking policy monthly.

UCPS is one of seven out of the 116 [school districts](#) in North Carolina that is currently keeping masks optional. In August, Gov. Roy Cooper sent a [letter](#) to 55 school districts, including UCPS, that had voted to keep masks optional. After that letter, 50 of those districts reversed to mask required. Two later reversed course.

“We have stayed the course,” UCPS Board Chair told The Epoch Times. “We never went back to mask-required for several reasons.”

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Though the bill leaves the decision up to the school board, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) threatened Union County based on the allegation that UCPS had not only voted to make masks optional but also voted to drop quarantine and contact tracing procedures; however, Melissa Merrell, the UCPS board chair, said UCPS never stopped quarantining or contact tracing.

The state had required masks for all school districts from August 2020 to July 2021, and during that time UCPS was one of the few school districts that offered in-person learning, as others had gone virtual.

Though masks were required, Merrell said UCPS was still sending thousands of kids home on quarantine, which allowed for UCPS to master its quarantining and cleaning protocols designed to prevent the spread of the CCP ([Chinese Communist Party](#)) virus, commonly known as the novel coronavirus, the pathogen that causes COVID-19.

“We felt like we had the expertise to return to mask-optional, compared to the districts that had gone to Plan C, or all virtual, last year,” Merrell said.

But NCDHHS later changed the rules, Merrell said.

In the 2020-2021 StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit, even under the mask requirement, people were sent home if identified as having been within six feet of a positive case for 15 minutes.

In the July 30, 2021, updated toolkit, mask-required schools no longer have to identify and quarantine anyone within six feet of a positive case, while schools that are mask-optional are required to quarantine anyone who was within six feet for 15 minutes for 14 days, even if that person hasn’t tested positive.

“We did not feel that was fair,” Merrell said.

Leaving the school system mask-optional is the “safest, most responsible” option, she said, because by being optional, UCPS is still required to identify anyone who has been around someone who has tested positive.

Students and staff are sent home unless they had tested positive within the last three months, unless the identified and the positive case were both wearing a mask, or unless they had been vaccinated.

“Those people get a phone call from the health director, and if they do not meet one of those three exclusions, they go home,” Merrell said. “In looking at the other counties around us that reversed to mask required in August after they received Gov. Cooper’s letter, they are still having COVID-19 positives in their schools, so if masks work, then why do they still have hundreds of people each week testing positive?”

Mask-required districts aren’t required to identify and send home people within six feet of a positive case, which Merrell said is a reward to those schools that mandate masks, and a bribe to schools that are mask-optional.

“My question is, what problem are we solving here?” Merrell asked. “Are we really reducing COVID cases, or simply reducing the number on quarantine? I contend that we are not solving anything by not having to identify close contacts and allowing them to stay in school until they become positive only because you reverse from mask-optional to required.”

The Union County Health Director Dennis Joyner, who Merrell said had never attended their board meetings and declined offers to do so, had denied UCPS’ request to reduce quarantine time from 14 to 10 to seven days as allowed by CDC and the toolkit.

“He said he would not give us anything less than 14 days until we reversed to a mask mandate, and he and two county commissioners told us that we were reading the toolkit wrong, which we weren’t,” Merrell said. “We took that back to the school board and they said, ‘Absolutely not.’”

NCDHHS’s Threat

... NCDHHS, threatening the board

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“We never stopped doing that to begin with, though they were under the impression that our 60 nurses had dropped those procedures,” she said. “That has been a false narrative with the state and the media.”

NCDHHS also threatened UCPS with legal abatement, meaning that it would take over all of UCPS’ 53 schools “if we posed an imminent threat to the community,” Merrell said.

“This honestly made me laugh because not only were our COVID [cases] decreasing, but we were also just named the number one performing school district in North Carolina,” Merrell said.

After reaching out to an outside attorney for a second reading of the toolkit, the attorney confirmed that the board was reading the toolkit correctly, and found that state statute required the health director, not the school nurses, must handle quarantining and contact tracing.

“We immediately became concerned that our nurses were in violation of state statute because at this time we had about 7,400 students and staff out on quarantine,” Merrell said.

In September, UCPS called a special meeting in which it requested and received its reduction in quarantine after finding that only 99 of the 5,410 students and staff that had been sent home on quarantine for 14 days later tested positive.

“They were perfectly healthy and being denied their right by state law to receive a sound education,” Merrell said. “This was the problem: only about 1 percent tested positive for COVID, but they were sending home over 16 percent to quarantine for 14 days. This is why I pleaded with the health director and county leadership for a reduction so we could get our kids back in school.”

A Mecca of Conflict

As the board has persisted in keeping masks optional, the meetings have become meccas for pro-mask and anti-mask protesters who have had to be separated by barricades set up by the sheriff’s department.

“Our decisions have brought out social activists from other counties and states pushing for what they call ‘universal masking,’” Merrell said.

In addition to threats on her, her family, and her students, Merrell said someone used her UCPS email address to list her house for sale and to move her out of state.

“My phone blew up, and I started getting offers on my home, and movers calling to work out bids on our moving to California, Florida, and Maryland,” Merrell said. “I’ve also had bank accounts opened under my name that are currently under investigation.”

Though it’s been challenging, Merrell said, what keeps her moving forward is her belief in the success of UCPS and the county.

“I believe that the parents and taxpayers that voted for me in 2014 and 2018 trust me to be their voice on our board of education, and they keep me going because I’m going to finish the job that they elected me to do,” Merrell said.



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