

# NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS



## PRESS RELEASE

### For Immediate Release

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January 27, 2022 - Heathsville, VA, The Northumberland County Public Schools' School Board met in-person for a Special-called meeting. The meeting was open to the public in person and through Zoom audio conference calling as a result of COVID-19 guidelines.

### Closed Meeting Action Items

- The School Board approved NHS Winter Academy starting February 5, 2022.
- The School Board approved Yolonda Thompson as a Special Education Teacher for Winter Academy; Melissa Saunders as a Mathematics Teacher for Winter Academy; and Sergeant Samuel as a Paraprofessional for Winter Academy.
- The School Board approved Zachary Woolard as a Mechanic.

### Public Comments Regarding EO2

The School Board listened to public comments, both in-person and online, regarding the Governor's Executive Order Number Two. Here is a summary of the public comments:

### Public Comments

**Suzanne Smart** stated she is a mother of two and a resident of Heathsville. Ms. Smart stated she understands the board has spent significant time with attorneys and school board association representatives. She asked if the board spent equal time with their constituents (parents, students and community members). She stated the board did not get elected by a group of attorneys or school board association members; they are elected by their constituents. Ms. Smart stated if a person was around November of last year, he/she knew the people have spoken, both at the state level and locally in Northumberland County. Ms. Smart provided an overview on masks. Ms. Smart stated masks negatively affect learning. They limit communication and decrease the ability to hear and see facial expressions. For young children, this is critical for speech development. They limit O2 levels and concentration. Medically, masks do not prevent transmission of SARS COVID 2. Ms. Smart quoted Dr. Paul Alexander, Clinical Epidemiologist, whose research shows masking is ineffective and in some ways harmful to one's health. Ms. Smart stated the Danish study showed that masks are not effective at preventing the spread. The Bangladesh study showed it reduced the spread by 0-13%.

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**Choya Haynie** asked the School Board to reconsider that children do not need masks in the schools. She thinks masks are unhealthy. Ms. Haynie has read several studies that with the mask, within 3 minutes, the O2 level is way above normal for children. She stated for teachers, if they want to wear a mask, they can wear one; however, her children will not take their mask off because they are scared they will be reprimanded and this action will be held against them. She asked her daughter why, and her daughter said that she wants to go to a good school, and she doesn't want to be penalized and prevented from getting into a good college. Ms. Haynie thanked the board for allowing the kids to come back to school from virtual learning. Ms. Haynie stated Governor Youngkin has done the right thing, and it's our choice if children should wear a mask or not.

**Amy Fetter** stated she is located in District 5 and raising her grandson. Ms. Fetter said she knows all the studies and what is on the news, but this is personal to her. She mentioned her grandson's teacher does not know what he looks like. Ms. Fetter told the board she wants them to vote with their hearts and thinks that people need to show respect for Governor Youngkin and that she respected what Governor Northam mandated. Ms. Fetter said if someone wants to wear a mask, she is all for it.

**Edgar Doleman** began with a question and asked if there was current legislation that mandates maskings and to what limits. Mr. Doleman stated that one thing he noticed is that masks do not work very well. He stated that it is important for kids' social interaction to be able to read faces and expressions. Mr. Doleman said that in Oregon, when his daughter's school went virtual, they formed learning pods. Mr. Doleman said that his daughter reported that it had a great impact on the kids' ability to interact and how well they felt about themselves compared to the kids that were at home or having to go mask somewhere. Mr. Doleman stated that kids with weaker home lives might suffer more than kids who have strong home lives.

**Dr. Tyron Williams** stated he is a pastor of Mount Olive Baptist Church. Pastor Williams stated the CDC, along with VA Department of Health, along with science, tell us that the wearing of masks does in fact save lives. Pastor Williams stated that we can go online and find official authorities including doctors and scientists that support this point of view. There also are conspiracy theories out there that make this thing dangerous. Yes, we have the freedom of wearing masks or even taking vaccines, but we also have the responsibility of safeguarding life and protecting our fellow man. Pastor Williams stated if we don't protect each other, as well as ourselves, we will never bring this virus under control. Wearing a mask will help keep schools

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open, but if this virus continues to morph, it will take many more lives. Dr. Williams stated it's time to bring it under control. We do have responsibility for our children while they are wearing masks in schools. They are still able to learn; not wearing a mask will keep them out of school because the disease will continue to spread. Pastor Williams said let's keep schools open, but let's safeguard our little ones.

**Shavonne Savoy** stated this is about kids not politics, and she doesn't want her kids sick because she has a sick mother at home. Keeping a mask, if it saves one child's life, is good enough for her. Ms. Savoy stated that anything that one person has researched, she can go online and find something to dispute it the other way. The main thing is, we have been wearing the mask since it started, and it has been going well. Ms. Savoy stated she is worried about her child and her mother, and we should be worried about each other, if it is helping at all to save one life. Ms. Savoy stated she has lost healthy people from Covid; it's not a joke and it's not about politics. She just wants to keep kids safe.

**Tara Brent** Ms. Brent said she is speaking as a parent of two middle school students, but she also is speaking mainly on behalf of her son. Ms. Brent stated her son has been dealing with health issues since contracting Covid back in November. Ms. Brent is concerned about her son because he can not be vaccinated yet, and she would like to know if a decision is made for a mask to be a parental choice, what would the options be for students who are not safe to be in school with students that are not wearing masks?

**Christina Thompson** stated she has a child in high school. She said there is different information swirling around about the mask, and you can find different information. Ms. Thompson stated the CDC recently said cloth masks are not working. She said if you buy a box of masks, on the side, it reads masks cannot prevent the transmission of viruses such as Covid. She feels for people on both sides and feels there should be a choice. She knows there are negative effects of wearing a mask. Ms. Thompson stated there is a dehumanizing effect that happens when children cannot see the faces of their friends and the teachers they love and respect. She stated that since we have had masks required, it has not stopped the spread. We still have Covid cases even though people wear masks and are vaccinated. She said it's time to let parents have a choice in the matter, and there are a lot of doctors and scientists speaking of this as well. Ms. Thompson does think there should be arrangements made available for those that are scared such as virtual learning.

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**Sabrina Conley** thanked the board for the opportunity to speak. Ms. Conley said if kids really understood the importance of wearing a mask, if they really understood how many lives have been lost and how many kids died, they would want to wear a mask. Ms. Conley said parents would think otherwise because of the news and what we hear, but if it's a vote from the kids, she strongly believes kids would want to protect themselves and other kids. Ms. Conley said if kids went to school without masks, imagine how many kids will be out of school, in virtual, failing, how many teachers would be out. Ms. Conley truly believes that these kids should be protected, and these parents need to push the importance to these kids on wearing masks. She said we, as parents, need to show them and educate them to know the importance of wearing masks.

**Carl Perez** stated back when the pandemic started, parents said whatever we need to do to get our kids back in school, we do, and that proceeded us quickly getting things in place and ready. He said now parents have their kids back in school. First, people were nervous because people were sick; we had call out; quarantines. Mrs. Vanlandingham was emailing people daily for quarantine and isolation, before the vaccine, and we overcame that. We are starting to see a spike after Christmas break and now. Pastor Perez stated Covid is not being taken seriously, and people are talking about how it's not working in other schools. He said Covid so far has worked for us because we're a smaller community, and we are not immune to these things. The mask mandate is tiring, but at the same time, Pastor Perez thinks it's helping our schools to not get the outbreak like other places. Pastor Perez stated just because you have a mask does not mean you are not going to get it or spread it, but it means you have a lower chance of infecting others or being infected. Pastor Perez stated in the middle of cases, when cases are climbing, and we are still getting phone calls of people being quarantined, people being sick, bus drivers being hospitalized, we lost one of our employees. Pastor Perez does not understand why this discussion has to be heated or debated because we are about saving as many lives as we can. Pastor Perez said he personally does not agree with the mask mandate being optional, but he believes everyone should be safe.

**Chris Timberlake** stated he appreciated everyone's input and thoughts and concerns on this, and there is probably no right answer on this. Everyone has a viewpoint, and he just goes by the numbers. He provided links in the Zoom chat. He said that Covid spikes in January, and that's why we are wearing masks. Mr. Timberlake said if the numbers are spiking, and kids are wearing their masks, the mask is really effective. Mr. Timberlake said that the flu also was spiking and that people have died from flu and heart attacks. We all want the children to be safe. We can send them to school in masks, and they can come home, take their mask off and contact Covid from

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their parents and go back to school and transmit it. He said that there is no way to prevent this 100%.

Jason Smart echoed a little bit of what was said from the last speaker. He said there is conflicting information, and there are valid points being given from both sides. He thinks that's the very reason to leave the decision up to the parents. Those who wish to mask, should. For those that feel it's detrimental for them, and the parents don't want their children to be masked up, they should have that right. Mr. Smart read the code of Virginia Section 240.1 about the right of the parent. The code states parents have the fundamental right to make decisions concerning the upbringing, education, and care of a parent's child. Mr. Smart stated to the board to please uphold that section of the code of Virginia and the Executive Order.

## Board Action Regarding EO2

The School Board passed the following policies. **At this time and effective immediately, the wearing of masks is optional for students in school buildings. NCPS continues to strongly encourage everyone to wear a mask, especially when they are within 6 feet of others.** Specifically, the School Board approved the following

- Students have **the option to wear face coverings when in NCPS buildings**.
- In accordance with a federal public health order, **students and employees must wear face coverings when on buses**.
- **All employees must wear face coverings when in NCPS buildings and when within 6 feet of others.** Governor Youngkin's Executive Order only addresses students. Staff are still required to wear masks per the following guidance: Virginia Occupational Safety and Health [COVID-19 workplace standards](#) and Occupational Safety and Health Administration [workplace guidelines](#).
- The VDH and VDOE guidance for dealing with positive tests and close contacts has not changed. Parents can choose whether or not their child wears a mask; however, students who do not wear masks and test positive for COVID-19 or are identified as close contacts will have longer isolation and quarantine periods, per the guidance provided by VDH and VDOE on Friday, Jan. 21, 2022 (see below): "VDH recommends a 10-day isolation or quarantine period for students who are not willing to wear a mask in school on days 6-10 after quarantine or isolation."
- NCPS is committed to equal treatment of students, regardless of mask use.

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- NCPS teachers and staff will not be responsible for ensuring if a student wears or does not wear a mask. It is expected that the parent will communicate the expectation with the student.

Please know the School Board does not take this decision lightly. However, it is the School Board's understanding that Governor Youngkin's recent executive order gives flexibility when it comes to requiring masks in school buildings for students.

Please note the School Board may opt to adjust the mask policy in the future. The School Board will continue to monitor local case numbers as they make these decisions. NCPS will keep students, families, and staff informed if any changes occur.

In the meantime, NCPS reminds students, families, and staff to continue to follow the health and safety protocols listed below. This includes staying home when you are feeling sick, getting tested if you start to experience COVID-19 symptoms, and remaining socially distanced as much as possible.

- **consistent and correct wearing of face coverings for staff;**
- **physical distancing when possible;**
- **frequent hand sanitizing and respiratory etiquette;**
- **temperature checks;**
- **staying home when sick;**
- **disinfecting and sanitizing of school campuses;**
- **contact tracing, in combination with isolation and quarantine.**

This motion passed with a 3-2 vote. (In favor: Mrs. O'Bier, Dr. Davis, Mrs. Christopher; Opposed: Ms. Mazyck, Mrs. Sterrett).

## Board Comments

**Mrs. Mazyck:** "As I reflect on this dilemma, we find ourselves in at this time I am reminded of a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He once said, "Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the questions, is it politics? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor political, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right."

It could be argued by these comments today that both sides believe they are demonstrating what they believe is safe for them. Politics is what created this dilemma. Whatever decision is ultimately made will not be the popular decision for some.



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After hearing and reading comments, statistics, and letters from parents, staff, and the experts it is my position to advocate for universal masking for the entire district because it is the right thing to do. I believe that one's person's rights end when it impacts another person's right. I wholeheartedly agree that currently to lessen the mitigation standards is asking for more incidents of the spread of COVID 19. We have the responsibility to protect the students, and staff employed in this district to the best of our ability. While we wait for clarity around this dilemma from the supreme courts, it is my position to advocate for universal masking for all, along with the other mitigation steps currently in place.

I started with a quote from Dr, Martin Luthur King and will end with another one, "The time is always right to do what is right."

**Mrs. Sterrett:** "The decision that has been forced on this board is shared by boards all over Virginia. Every parent, teacher, staff, and community member is faced with the same choice. And although it has been cloaked in the guise of simplicity: as the choice of parents to decide what's best for their children, that is not really what this is. Instead it is a choice to protect the most vulnerable in our community. It is the choice to help keep people we know safe; the teacher who is being treated for cancer, the parent with diabetes or heart disease or dialysis, the grandparent recovering from hip surgery, the child with a special education plan in place because he is terrified of getting the virus. Everyone has suffered in some way, particularly the children who have had to miss out on a normal school life that doesn't revolve around sanitation and distance. But the real choice at this time is our obligation to protect each other, to show our children that it's not about our comfort and convenience and our dislike of covering our faces. It's about caring for the most vulnerable among us. It's about supporting each other for, hopefully, only a little longer, until the predicted improvement comes. Northumberland schools are like a family, and have been a safe harbor in an unprecedented time. We've pulled together and done everything in our power to stay open and keep everyone safe. I won't support anything less now."

**Mrs. O'Bier:** "It is my job to be the voice of parents and community members who trust me with the care and education of their students. Schools need to be in a safe environment to learn and thrive. I personally do not take the job or responsibility lightly and will always put the best interest of our students first. We will need to follow steps to replace a new normalcy in our student's lives. Following Gov. Youngkin's EO2 is one of the first steps to make that happen."