

Erie County school districts finalize face masking policies as students prepare for classes

DAVID BRUCE | Erie Times-News

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Erie County's public and Catholic schools are finalizing their face masking policies as students count down the days to the start of the 2021-22 school year.

A couple of school districts, Erie and Wattsburg, are requiring everyone to wear a mask. Most others will require them only if the county has a high level of COVID-19 community transmission.

Two districts, Union City and Corry, are basing their face masking policies on



meanwhile, the Catholic Diocese of Erie is recommending face masks but leaving any mandates to government agencies or the individual schools.

"With our governing structure ... we provide guidance and some policies, but we empower the folks at our schools to do what they need to do," said Jim Gallagher, superintendent of schools for the 13-county Catholic Diocese of Erie. "I expect that many of our schools will require face masks when classes start."

Jim Gallagher is the superintendent of schools for the Catholic Diocese of Erie.

JACK HANRAHAN/ERIE TIMES-NEWS

The 2021-22 school year will start as the county continues to see a rise in daily COVID-19 cases spurred by the highly transmissible delta variant. With no federal, statewide or county mandate to wear face masks, each district or school is left to implement its own policy.

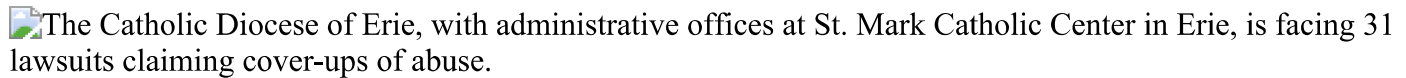
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Here is a list of the districts, with their face masking policies as of Thursday. The list was provided by the Northwest Tri-County Intermediate Unit 5.

- Students and staff are **required** to wear face masks: **Erie, Wattsburg Area** (to be re-evaluated each month).
- Masks are **required** when the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's](#) COVID Data Tracker **shows significant or high** community transmission: **Fort LeBoeuf, General McLane, Millcreek, North East, Northwestern, Erie County Technical Center.**
- Masks are **required** when the COVID Data Tracker shows **high** community transmission: **Fairview, Girard, Iroquois.**
- Masks **might** be required if there is **significant or high** community transmission within their district: **Corry and Union City.**
- The decision is up to individual schools: **Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Erie.**



recommended but optional in the Warren County School District.



The Catholic Diocese of Erie, with administrative offices at St. Mark Catholic Center in Erie, is not requiring face masks at its 30 schools. Instead, ... **Show more** ▼

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While the Erie and Wattsburg Area school districts are requiring students and staff to wear face masks for the start of the school year, Union City and Corry are taking a much more targeted approach.

Both school districts are looking at COVID-19 data from the ZIP codes within their districts' boundaries. Any face masking mandates will be based on local, not countywide, community transmission rates and COVID-19 test positivity percentages.


"Corry is a very unique school district in that it spans three different counties," said Sheri Yetzer, Corry Area School District superintendent. "Instead of looking at the COVID-19 numbers from Erie, Warren and Crawford counties, we look at the eight ZIP codes from which our district draws students."

In the Union City Area School District, Superintendent Matt Bennett monitors data daily from his district's ZIP codes. If cases and test positivity percentages rise, it doesn't automatically mean that students and staff will be required to wear face masks.

He will first examine the data to see where the cases originate. If they are primarily found in a single family, a districtwide face mask mandate is less



"We have so few students in our district, just over 1,000, that a couple of cases can put us in the high transmission level," Bennett said. "If I see something truly alarming, we can do distance learning for a day until the school board can meet and look at our policy."

 Union City Area School District Superintendent Matt Bennett is shown at Union City Area Elementary School on August 25, 2020, the first day of school, in Union City. Staff, students and parents are adjusting to a new routine due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

Union City Area School District Superintendent Matt Bennett is using COVID-19 data of households within the district to make COVID-19 policy decisions.

GREG WOHLFORD/ERIE TIMES-NEWS

Both Yetzer and Bennett said their approach of using COVID-19 data specific to their districts provides a more accurate assessment of the chances of an outbreak among students.

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Bennett also acknowledged that the district must consider the issues many parents and student have with a face masking mandate.

"But my top priority of the administration and the school board is the health and safety of our kids," Bennett said. "It's not a political stance that our district is taking. It's a local stance."

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