

Student body divided on optional masking

BY AVA EBERHART & LAUREN LU

Students, teachers and staff at Country Day are no longer required to wear masks indoors, but the school strongly encourages them to stay masked following the March 12 change.

This unmasking adheres to the California Department of Public Health's new policy, which is based on the decrease in COVID-19 cases in the state.

Those who are taking advantage of the updated rule are in the minority.

So far, the trend on campus appears to be people continuing to wear masks indoors. However, the decision to mask outdoors is about half-and-half.

In a March 15 Octagon poll sent to the high school students, 24 of 32 respondents answered that they would continue to wear their mask indoors, while 15 of 32 said they would wear their masks outdoors.

Students continue to wear their masks for two main reasons: social discomfort and safety.

Sophomore Juliette Zuñiga plans to continue wearing her mask at school, at least indoors. However, she will occasionally remove it when she deems it appropriate.

For example, if she is outside during morning break or lunch, or if many people are unmasking around her in a well-ventilated location, Zuñiga will carefully take off her mask.

"I don't really care what other people decide to do, but people still need to stay safe — just because we're unmasking doesn't mean you can, you know, spit on people. There are still people at risk and COVID-19 is still around," Zuñiga said.

In combination with her concern for staying protected, Zuñiga is choosing to keep on her mask for social reasons.

"I know some people still aren't fully comfortable with the change. I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable," Zuñiga said.

For many students, it's taking a lot to get used to seeing the other half of their peers' and teachers' faces.

"I feel like socially, I'm not ready to have it off," said freshman Anniston Miller, who continues to wear her mask both indoors and outdoors.

Sophomore Rachel Pirie expressed concerns about safety and adaptation to the new protocols. She currently wears her mask both inside and outside.

"I understand people not wanting to wear a mask outdoors, but inside, things are moving a little bit too fast," Pirie said.

Freshman Cara Shin, who also wears her mask both in and out of the classroom, explained that she won't unmask for now due to safety reasons.

"I think it's just safety protocol, and it's not bad to be too safe," Shin said.

However, numerous students who have decided to stay masked are comfortable being around those who have chosen to leave their mask off.

"I think it's their choice and I don't distance myself from them. It's their opinion, and it doesn't bother me too much," Shin said.

Some students who have chosen to unmask say they don't mind if people choose to keep their masks on.

"It is nice to see more people's faces, but it still feels normal either way. I honestly forget if I'm wearing a mask or not," said sophomore Andrew Klieger, who is currently attending school unmasked.

When the new masking protocol was put into effect, Klieger unmasked almost immediately because he forgot to bring masks to school. It was easier for him in the morning to not need to remember to bring one in the morning.

Unmasked students have also experienced awkward interactions stemming from removing their masks.

Sophomore Chase Usrey is one of the students who has decided to unmask, although his initial social discomfort has gradually ebbed away.

He chose to remain unmasked simply because it is more convenient, as well as easier for him to breathe.

"There were some awkward moments on the first or second day after we were allowed to be unmasked," he said.

"I was going to get a COVID-19 test, and everyone in line was masked — I was the only one that was unmasked."

High school teachers have responded to the mask mandate evolution in different ways.

French teacher Richard Day is still requiring students to wear masks during his classes due to health and safety concerns.

"I'm as impatient as anyone to get to the point where we can comfortably take our masks off, but we are not out of the woods yet," Day said.

"I'm thankful that my students are understanding and continuing to wear masks in my classroom."

As of now, Day does not have any plans to remove his mask or stop requiring French students to wear masks in his classroom.

On the other hand, English teacher Jason Hinojosa doesn't mind if his students choose to leave their masks off in his classroom, as he doesn't wear a mask

anymore himself.

"I'm really grateful to see students' faces. I feel like faces express a lot of emotion, and I feel much more connected to my students," Hinojosa said.

"I don't want that to be misunderstood as a request for anyone to do something they feel uncomfortable doing — I respect and encourage students keeping masks

on to keep them on if that keeps them comfortable."

Despite there being varied responses to the updated mask mandate, not much change has been made to the overall environment at Country Day.

"We're all good friends here, so I don't think the optional masking will affect the school's social climate," Pirie said.



SMILING FACES Seniors Max Wu and Elliot Crowder exit the Matthews Library where masks are no longer required. PHOTO BY ARIJIT TRIVEDI

CUP: Significant change still years away

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possible, Thomsen said.

"That audit will probably be done by the end of this spring," he said.

Meantime, enrollment is rising slowly. Before the CUP was updated, the school was limited to 544 total students and 144 high school students. Now, the limit is 596 total students and 180 high school students and enrollment

has already pushed past the old 544 cap.

"We are now at 547 or 548 students," Thomsen said. "That's the only significant change yet."

The plan, according to Thomsen, is for the school to increase enrollment bit by bit every year until hitting the cap. Thomsen previously said it would take around seven to 10 years to hit the new cap.

In addition to providing money

for the traffic light, the city asked the school to continue working with the neighborhood on managing traffic and parking.

"The neighbors are concerned that if we have 46 more kids, that will make the traffic worse," Thomsen said. "The school has always worked on that and we're continuing to work on that."

Traffic measures taken include prohibiting parking anywhere on Latham, staggering pickup times,

having the Parents Association organize carpools and, in the future, setting up drop-off points on Munroe Street.

"According to the neighbors, who we meet with quarterly, they have said the traffic's actually doing pretty well," Thomsen said. "I have been pleasantly surprised that as we are coming out of COVID-19, the traffic increase has been minimal."

Ann Evans, who wrote the initial protest to the CUP, praised the school for keeping on top of its mitigation efforts.

"The plan for having additional drop-off points that would not be on Latham sounds very, very positive. There hasn't been the ability to go forward on that so far because of COVID-19, but in general, the school is enforcing well."

However, one big point of contention remains between the school and the neighborhood: the Sierra Homeowners Agreement, signed in 1996, that also limits the school's enrollment.

Both before and after the CUP was updated, Thomsen said the school has been trying to come to a new, negotiated agreement with the neighborhood.

The neighbors, Evans said, mainly want two things: first, to allow newer neighbors to sign and join the agreement; second, for the school to include a new permanent enrollment cap.

"There were around 60 neighbors who had signed on in 1996," Thomsen said. "Since that time there's only eight or nine neighbors left who are technically remaining signatories to the original agreement."

The school agreed to allow newer residents to sign the agreement and sent an official revised draft to the neighbors in April, 2021. But that proposed agreement did not include a fixed enrollment cap. The neighbors did not respond.

"As long as no permanent enrollment cap is included, a modified agreement will not be possible," Evans said. "Lee said that the school's attorneys wouldn't allow it, so there's no reason to respond back. We said it was not even worth discussing."

The neighborhood wants some sort of permanent cap because, in Evans' words, the school is on a fixed-size property with no room for physical growth and can only deal with parking and drop-off by keeping numbers down.

But without an agreement with the neighbors, the school must either constrain expansion or violate the Sierra Homeowners Agreement at risk of being sued, although Evans has said in the past that the neighbors did not wish to sue the school.

For now, both sides remain locked in a stalemate.



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