



Programs & Services Committee Report

City of Newton In City Council

Wednesday, February 9, 2022

Present: Councilors Krintzman (Chair), Noel, Albright, Wright, Ryan, Humphrey, and Greenberg
Absent: Councilor Baker

Also Present: Councilor Kalis

City Staff: Linda Walsh, Commissioner of Health & Human Services; Jonathan Yeo, Chief Operating Officer; Ruth Hoshino, Director of School Health Services; Liam Hurley, Assistant Superintendent; Michelle Pizzi O'Brien, Director of Human Resources; Nathan Giacalone, Committee Clerk

#73-22 **Request for update on the City's COVID-19 efforts**
COUNCILORS KALIS, KRINTZMAN, LAREDO, HUMPHREY, OLIVER, DOWNS, NOEL, NORTON, BAKER, WRIGHT, LUCAS, BOWMAN, GROSSMAN AND LIPOF requesting an update on the City's efforts regarding the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, including whether ARPA funds can be used to offer free COVID testing for Newton residents, the status of school-based COVID testing, vaccination requirements for city and school employees, and other ongoing or new support the City is offering residents and businesses.

Action: **Programs & Services Held 7-0**

Note: The Committee was joined for discussion on this item by Chief Operating Officer Jonathan Yeo, Director of Human Resources Michelle Pizzi O'Brien, Commissioner of Health & Human Services Linda Walsh, Assistant Superintendent Liam Hurley, and Director of School Health Services Ruth Hoshino. Mr. Yeo thanked the Committee for its patience in scheduling this discussion and stated that staff would briefly speak to the Committee before taking questions.

Commissioner Walsh reviewed the City's COVID strategy, stating that the focus is now on returning to normal as the virus becomes endemic. She credited Newton's high vaccination rate with protecting the community from serious disease, citing that 95 percent of residents have received at least one dose of the vaccine and about 88 percent are fully vaccinated. More readily available antigen tests and other basic measures also deserve credit. Commissioner Walsh added that while the indoor mask mandate was re-imposed at the start of the Omicron surge it will hopefully be rescinded soon as Omicron wanes.

Director Pizzi O'Brien reviewed the vaccination policy for City employees and credited the workforce, union leadership, and the HR/legal team for its success. Developed after much research, the vaccine policy was implemented in November 2021 with a compliance period extended to January 14. City employees are required to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 unless they have an approved medical/religious exemption. All unions and employees had participated by the compliance deadline. Almost 95 percent of the City workforce is fully vaccinated with the remainder either on an approved exemption or pending full vaccination.

Mr. Hurley and Ms. Hoshino delivered the attached presentation, describing the Newton Public Schools (NPS) layered risk-mitigation approach. Mr. Hurley stated that vaccination is mandatory for all NPS staff and excluding a small number of approved exemptions there is nearly 100 percent compliance. Vaccination and booster clinics have been offered and test kits have also been distributed to students and staff for the opt-in weekly testing program. The medical advisory group will be meeting to address the Governor's recent announcement that the school mask mandate will be rescinded at the end of February. Ms. Hoshino stated that NPS was pleased to have met the goal of keeping the students learning in-person and achieving a high vaccination rate. She stated that cases mirror the community and have been in steady decline following the omicron surge. In-school transmission remains very rare.

Councilors thanked City staff for its work handling the pandemic and staff responded in kind, thanking the Council for its support.

Councilors asked the following questions:

Q: Have any unions not entered into an agreement on the vaccine mandate?

A: Director Pizzi O'Brien answered that no agreement was reached with the Newton Police Association, though she clarified that the policy still applies to them. She added that union leadership and the employees have participated and are now in full compliance or pending compliance of the policy.

Q: Do the policies in place whether with the unions or City policy account for booster shots?

A: Director Pizzi O'Brien answered that the City has only one policy on the municipal side which covers all employees regardless of whether there is an agreement with their union or not. These agreements with unions would address different impacts of the policy but not its terms. Regarding boosters, Director Pizzi O'Brien stated that the policy requires continued vaccination or being in full vaccination status.

Q: The Governor has announced that the statewide mask mandate will lapse on February 28; will the medical advisory group then evaluate what to do?

A: Mr. Hurley answered that the medical advisory group will meet on February 15 to discuss this before offering a recommendation for the Superintendent and School Committee. Ms. Hoshino added that this policy change does not remove masking but leaves it up to local school districts while masks are still required in certain settings.

Q: What are the contingency plans if another variant emerges?

A: Commissioner Walsh and Ms. Hoshino answered that HHS has partnerships with groups such as the Holtzman Medical Group (led by Newton parent and physician Justin Holtzman) to aid with testing access and vaccine distribution. Though antigen tests are an important tool, they are expensive. The Holtzman Group has partnered with the City to offer multiple well-attended vaccination clinics across Newton. New opportunities to promote vaccination continue to be explored. Mr. Hurley stated that NPS' strategy is designed to be adjusted depending on the severity of a variant in order to maintain in-person learning.

Q: Has any ARPA funding been held back in case it is needed?

A: Mr. Yeo answered that the City has \$40 million held back and that the Mayor has been careful to spread out the use of the funds to keep them flexible.

Q: Do other City buildings such as City Hall meet the ventilation standards in place in the schools?

A: Mr. Yeo answered that ventilation improvements have been made at City Hall where possible along with other measures such as plexiglass barriers and having some staff work from home when possible. This plan has been successful as there have been no major problems with spread at City Hall. Similar situations exist at fire stations and police headquarters with improvements made to the extent that the buildings allow.

Q: When mask mandates are rescinded, can school clubs still require masking?

A: Mr. Hurley stated that this would be left up to the individual club, though they must be at least as strict as the district's policy.

Q: Is it known how many COVID cases are in City buildings at any one time?

A: Commissioner Walsh answered that HHS is aware of this and performs contact tracing but keeps the information confidential.

Q: How many staff left because of the vaccine mandate?

A: Director Pizzi O'Brien answered that two employees were separated from employment for noncompliance, and four others resigned or retired in response.

Q: Besides the employees who left, was there any pushback against the vaccine policy?

A: Director Pizzi O'Brien stated that the compliance window was extended to give employees more time to be heard out, to read through available resources, and more time to get vaccinated. She felt that HR faced more concerns than pushback from employees on this policy and credited cooperation with union leadership.

Q: When might the City lift the mask mandate?

A: Commissioner Walsh stated that a decision will be made on this soon.

Q: Has the City learned enough so that it can act quickly in case of another pandemic?

A: Commissioner Walsh stated that many lessons were learned throughout the pandemic and staff pulled together in the face of crushing workloads. This approach saw Newton retain its municipal health employees and she expressed confidence that the team would be ready if another variant comes. Mr. Hurley stated that the Superintendent tried to avoid making decisions for too far out as conditions kept changing. Though mistakes were made, overall there was a great response from staff.

Q: Wasn't it school vacation during the recent infection high point during the week of December 23-January 1?

A: Ms. Hoshino answered that this is because of how the district reports its statistics and these were cases which the district found out about during the break. Some of these could have been cases contracted before the break. Overall in-school transmission has been low.

Q: How is the district's supply of tests and personal protective equipment (PPE)?

A: Mr. Hurley and Ms. Hoshino answered that the City has plenty of both.

Other Councilor comments:

Staff has articulated effectively that rate of infection in Newton tracks the countrywide rate, demonstrating that remediation measures have been effective at preventing in-school transmission.

Looking ahead, perhaps an approach such as Mayor Wu's in Boston could be adopted which describes clear benchmarks such as hospital capacity and positivity rates for lifting restrictions.

Councilor Ryan made a motion to Hold which carried 7-0.

The meeting adjourned at 8:13pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Josh Krintzman, Chair

COVID Health and Safety Update

February 9, 2022



Health and Safety Guidelines

- Currently, NPS operates within the guidelines outlined in the [2021-22 Back to School Health and Safety Plan.](#)
- Our strategy has been a layered risk mitigation approach to keep COVID transmissions from spreading in Schools and has evolved over time

Framework of Risk Reduction Strategies

- Newton Medical Advisory Group
- Vaccination - mandatory for staff, Vaccine clinics have been ongoing
- COVID Testing, transitioned to weekly Antigen testing for all staff and students that opt-in and symptomatic testing
- Masks mandate currently in place, will address with MAG
- Ventilation Action Plan
- Stay home when sick, hand washing,
- Continue to monitor health data at national, state, and local levels



Student Vaccination Rate

- As of February 7, 2022 - At least one dose

Elementary 79.63%

Middle 85.93%

High 93.11%

All eligible NPS Students - 85.52%



COVID Cases in NPS

#73-22

- Data
 - Tests At-home weekly antigen tests - 58% of students opted-in
 - Cases - Mirrors the community with increases and decreases - including with omicron
 - In school transmission - very rare - extremely low incidence



Vaccination Rate in NPS

#73-22

As of **February 7, 2022**

Grade	1 Dose	2 Doses	3 Doses	Percentage of Students with at least one dose	Percentage of Students with at least two doses
PreK and Elementary					
PK-NECP	2.99%	8.96%	0.00%	11.94%	8.96%
PK-NECP (age 5 and above)	14.26%	42.86%	0.00%	57.14%	42.86%
K	5.39%	72.91%	0.67%	78.98%	73.58%
1	4.84%	70.01%	0.73%	75.57%	70.74%
2	5.07%	76.42%	0.47%	81.96%	76.89%
3	4.63%	73.22%	0.34%	78.19%	73.56%
4	5.31%	73.01%	0.92%	79.24%	73.93%
5	5.78%	77.10%	0.55%	83.42%	77.64%
All Elementary	5.17%	73.85%	0.61%	79.63%	74.46%
Middle School					
6	2.38%	75.26%	1.36%	79.00%	76.62%
7	4.23%	58.05%	27.36%	89.64%	85.41%
8	1.68%	53.35%	33.44%	88.47%	86.79%
All Middle School	2.79%	61.82%	21.31%	85.93%	83.13%
High School					
9	2.04%	55.30%	33.91%	91.24%	89.21%
10	2.21%	53.37%	35.16%	90.74%	88.53%
11	2.64%	36.01%	53.41%	92.07%	89.11%
12	7.94%	40.67%	49.38%	97.99%	90.05%
All High School	3.79%	46.19%	43.13%	93.11%	89.32%
All Eligible NPS Students	4.18%	61.69%	19.65%	85.52%	81.35%

Conclusion

- Will continue to monitor news on new variants
- We will remain nimble
- Will meet with Medical Advisory Group to confirm adjustments to health and safety plan
- Will monitor vaccination rates and continue to encourage all eligible students to be vaccinated

