Recently, Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker and Department of Education Commissioner Jeffery Riley, announced that mask mandates would be ending in schools, from February 28th. This ruling impacts schools across Massachusetts in very different ways, as some chose to drop their mask requirements right away on February 28th while others prefer to wait a little longer.

After carefully reviewing the current guidelines and the current COVID-19 situation in the community and at school, the senior leadership team at BISB has decided to drop the mandate starting on Monday April 11th. The senior leadership team’s review of COVID-19 trends at the school was important to informing them in making this decision. Since December of 2021, over 33% of students and teachers have contracted COVID-19, significantly raising immunity levels in the school.

The decision was guided by the knowledge that many students and staff could contract COVID-19 during March break. The school wants to give enough time for students and teachers to safely return to school and identify anyone that may have contracted the virus over the break through PCR testing. That week following Spring Break, the week of April 4th when the testing will take place, will likely be primarily virtual.

The only places where masks will still be required are on the school buses and in the school nurses’ office. These rules come from federal mandates currently in place.

There are some important notes of caution moving forward with these new mask policies. There are 100 students in the Early Years who have not been able to get vaccinated, which is one-fourth of the school’s student body. As a result the protocols which help protect these students will have to continue to be respected. For eligible students, 80% have been vaccinated, while 100% of teachers have been vaccinated.

For events hosted at the school, outside of school hours, including sport competitions and theatrical performances, masks will also not be required. For any events not hosted at BISB, guidelines will always be determined by the institution hosting it.

Moving forward the weekly pool testing will continue even when the mask mandate is dropped. Ventilation systems will remain in place, with more windows being opened as the weather warms up. The distancing rules for the cafeteria will also still be enforced to make sure that anyone who wants to wear a mask will feel comfortable.

The rules concerning individuals contracting COVID-19 will stay the same. Students and teachers must quarantine for ten days if they test positive for the virus, and any close contacts will still be tested with rapid antigen tests.

Ever since the pandemic began, the issue of mask-wearing has been very contentious. There have been strong opinions both for keeping the mask mandate while there have also been many who are tired of wearing masks and think the mandate should be removed. Since the school reopened in September 2020, Ms. Northey has been working diligently to reconcile these contrasting views, and implement COVID-19 guidelines that represent the best interests of the school. She has been very effective at making compromises in order to do this.

For families with members who are at high risk, because of comorbidities or other underlying factors, ensuring safety and wearing masks is an important priority. With the new mask rules, respecting the circumstances of others who may be at greater risk must be an upfront priority. Additionally, it is important to remember that 25% of the student body is not vaccinated or boosted, so that their safety can be respected.

BISB will be sure to support everyone and the individual choice that suits them best under these new rules. Anyone that would prefer to continue wearing a mask to allow them to feel safe, is encouraged to do so. The school is also happy to support anyone who may have difficulties with the significant change. Counselors will work closely with students to resolve any stress or anxiety that members of the school community may have. Any judgments of someone’s decision to wear or not wear a mask will not be tolerated.

Throughout the pandemic, masks have been one of the largest barriers to this normalcy that we now cherish. As we look to the future, the new mask rules bring light at the end of the tunnel with great optimism for the return of normalcy in schools and in our daily lives more broadly.