

North Clark County students protest mask mandates

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The current mask mandate in Washington schools has led students to walk out of class and protest the ongoing requirements.

Last week, students in schools across North Clark County took part in demonstrations to show their frustration with the continued requirement to wear masks in school. The demonstrations occurred the same week state Superintendent for Public Instruction Chris Reykdal voiced his support to move the decision on wearing masks into the hands of local school districts. Reykdal made the recommendation to the Washington State Department of Health and Gov. Jay Inslee, who later said he plans to unveil a timeline to lift mask mandates as a whole the following week.

In the Battle Ground Public Schools district, Amboy Middle School students demonstrated for the entire week. The district also had demonstrations at Battle Ground High School and Daybreak Middle School, BGPS spokesperson Rita Sanders said.

Hudson Young, an eighth grade student at Amboy, said he and other students at the school were inspired to organize a demonstration after similar protests occurred at Washougal High School.

"Me and all the people who are out here are just tired of the mask mandates so we decided to do something about it," Young said.

For the first few days, the protest took place in close proximity to the school before the district designated a specific area for those participating in the demonstration, Young said. A letter from the district on Feb. 8 acknowledged the protest at Amboy that day and said it had become "a disruption to the normal operation of the school and district, severely hampering our ability to provide a safe learning environment to our students in the

classroom."

The district letter stated numerous students were absent because they felt uncomfortable with the demonstration on campus. The letter announced the demonstration could only occur at the lower field of the school's campus, and those participating would receive an unexcused absence.

Although he said there were school officials who were supportive of the students' efforts, Young acknowledged the unexcused absences are impacting grades.

"There's a lot of people who said (the demonstration) wasn't going to work, it was a waste of time, what's the point of it, go home, but I just kept trucking along and going for it," Young said.

Young said those involved span the grade levels at Amboy Middle School.

"We need more people to go out and stand up for themselves and other people," Young said.

The La Center School District saw demonstrations at its middle and high schools. The La Center demonstrators had a designated time and place for their protests. Afterwards, they returned to class or were sent home.

LCSO Superintendent Peter Rosenkranz said students who didn't show up to class wouldn't be considered an unexcused absence.

"If a child goes to Olympia to protest a social issue and they want to have their voice heard with their parents, we would excuse it, so how is that different than having kids on our road?" Rosenkranz asked.

He said the students took part in a political process that was important to acknowledge.

"I want them in class. I want them learning, but this is what you do in a democracy. You try to have your voice heard, and when people don't listen, this is also what happens," Rosenkranz said.

Rosenkranz said he appreciated Reykdal's announcement,



COURTESY PHOTO

Amboy Middle School students demonstrate at a gate on campus as part of a weeklong series of protests against mask mandates from Feb. 7 to Feb. 11.

something he said was "long overdue." He noted how districts' hands are currently tied when it comes to the enforcement, or non-enforcement, of mandates. Districts that don't comply with the mandates could potentially lose state funding.

"If they pull state funding, I don't get to teach kids (and) that hurts kids," Rosenkranz said.

On Feb. 9, high school students from the Ridgefield School District demonstrated in front of the school much like other districts. RSD Superintendent Nathan McCann said on Feb. 11 he wasn't aware of any other demonstrations, adding the district is supportive of students who want to make their voices heard.

"Students protesting, that's been happening in this country for generations now," McCann said.

Earlier that day, the district's board of directors approved a letter in support of Reykdal's recommendation during a special meeting.

Woodland Public Schools saw demonstrations at its middle



COURTESY PHOTO

Amboy Middle School students demonstrate at a gate on campus as part of a weeklong series of protests against mask mandates from Feb. 7 to Feb. 11.

and high school, which district superintendent Michael Green said to his knowledge were organized by adults, not students. The protests on Feb. 4 proved to be "very disruptive," Green wrote in an email, though he said none of the students were disciplined or suspended for engaging in the demonstration.

Green said students who refused to wear masks in school were asked to call home, and there were a few instances of discipline not related to masking.

"We believe and support civil

discourse and principled protest so long as they are not disruptive to students and learning," Green wrote in the email. "Unfortunately, there have been several reports of rude and uncivil behavior on the part of adults and students who have engaged in these protests."

Green noted superintendents and school boards have asked for some metrics "to provide some hope that the mandates and restrictions will sunset." He said the statements by Reykdal and Inslee are encouraging.

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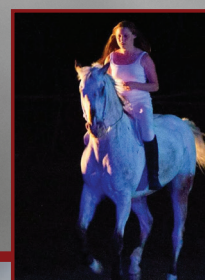
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