



## DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT

238 JEWETT AVENUE • BRIDGEPORT, CONNECTICUT 06606 • 203-416-1380 • FAX: 203-372-1961

### OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

February 9, 2022

Dear Parents,

I am writing today as a follow up to my message on February 7<sup>th</sup> regarding the mask mandate. In addition to the reasons stated in my letter, the decision to move to mask optional was made with the recognition that parental choice is foundational to our schools as we recognize the importance of parents as the primary educators of their children. While some may disagree with me, I truly believe moving to mask optional is in the best interest of our students.

As many of you have heard by now, I have been asked by the state to rescind my decision ([Letter from state](#)) as it stands to be in violation of pending legislation. Yesterday, it was announced that, the Executive Order of Governor Lamont will be extended beyond February 15<sup>th</sup> *by an act of the legislature*, which will result in an announcement by the Commissioner of Health to end the statewide mask mandate on February 28<sup>th</sup>. Decisions to extend any mask mandate beyond the 28<sup>th</sup> would then rest with local authorities (thus allowing us to make the decision). Because the Executive Order includes private schools, we would be in violation of the law if we were to end our mask requirement next week as I had hoped. While we make this decision under protest, we will postpone our transition to a mask optional policy accordingly.

Notwithstanding our decision to comply with the extension of the Executive Order by the legislation, I must express my sincere concerns with the position taken by the legislators to extend an Executive Order that was originally put in place during a time of extraordinary national crisis. There are legitimate concerns as to whether this legislative act, as it relates to private and religious schools, is within their authority.

To summarize our position:

- We agree with Governor Lamont that now is the time to give discretion to Superintendents on this issue;
- We believe that the extension of his Executive Order by the legislature is an overreach;
- Including non-public schools in such legislation threatens the established relationships between Church and state;
- We stand behind the principle that parents are the primary educators of our children; and
- We seek to protect our right to make decisions without the constraints of the public education systems.

In short, the current legislation gives the state Department of Education increased control over Catholic schools and this sets a dangerous precedent.

I know many of you may be disappointed. I call on each of you, as well as our neighboring dioceses and leaders in faith across our communities, to recognize this infringement and join in the public discourse by standing up for the rights of parents and leaders in private religious schools. Recently, a parent advocacy group was formed in the Diocese and I encourage you to get involved as there are genuine religious liberty issues to consider with the recent legislative action—issues that we will continue to monitor and seek change where necessary. The debate goes well beyond masks and it is important that your voice is heard on these important matters.

As a result of your cooperation and commitment, we have had tremendous success over this pandemic keeping our schools open safely without any communal spread or transmission of the virus among our children, families and staff. For this we are extremely proud. It was our independence from the public school directives that allowed us to maintain an outstanding educational experience for our children throughout this pandemic.

In the past few days, I have heard from many of you, and I want to thank you for your support and ask for your understanding over the next two weeks. Together we have brought this important issue to statewide attention, and there is much more to say. While there may be genuine differences of opinion, we all want the best for our children, and we believe that preserving Catholic school independence is a challenge we enthusiastically accept both now and in the future.

May God bless you and may Our Lady shower us with Her blessings as we work together in service to Christ.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "S. F. Cheeseman", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr. Steven F. Cheeseman  
Superintendent of Schools