

## **Covid -Can't Believe it is One Year Later**

**Tom Moscovic – Legislative Chair**

### **COVID-19 Restrictions To Be Partially Lifted For Spring Events**

"This is the start," Lt. Gov. Jon Husted said. "If conditions on the ground continue to improve, we can do even more." **(On March 4<sup>th</sup> Governor DeWine announced that all restrictions will be lifted if the cases go down to 50 per 100,000 population for two weeks)**

Employees and customers must continue to wear masks, seating in pods will continue, and facilities should have walkways which allow social distancing. General admission (lawn seating, bleachers, etc.) are allowed as long as social distancing is followed.

Amusement parks will follow the same guidelines laid out by the state in 2020.

If COVID-19 numbers continue to fall and vaccination rates rise, larger crowds will be allowed at all events, the governor said.

"The goal is to get back to what life was before the pandemic. There's a bridge to that life and we have to take that bridge. The bridge is built on two things: vaccinations and to continue to wear masks," DeWine said. "There will be a point in the future, when we have herd immunity, when we won't have to wear masks."

Ohio officials are working with leaders of fairs and festivals to determine unique protocols for those upcoming events. Protocols for proms, banquet centers, wedding receptions and other events are being developed and will be released soon.

Fewer and fewer Ohioans are entering hospitals for COVID-19 treatment, Gov. Mike DeWine announced. As of Thursday afternoon, 1,262 Ohioans were in hospital beds being treated for COVID-19, the governor said. That's down from 1,338 the week before and has been steadily dropping for weeks, the governor noted.

The decrease in COVID-19 hospitalizations has largely been driven by the state's vaccination strategy, DeWine argued. Ohio health officials have been vaccinating older Ohioans and Ohioans with long-term, chronic medical illnesses.

At the peak of the pandemic, Ohioans 80 and older made up approximately 25 percent of all COVID-19-related hospitalizations. As of Thursday, of the state's 1,262 hospitalizations, only 18 percent were people 80 or older.

### **Revamped Testing Bill Heads to Senate**

On Thursday, March 4, 2021, a substitute version of House Bill 67 was voted out of the House and will head to the Senate. The bill addresses state testing for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year. The bill passed 93-1. However, the bill's emergency clause did not have sufficient votes with most House Democrats voting against the measure. Without an emergency clause the bill will not take effect for 90 days, after the end of the school year.

The new version of the bill emerged in committee this week after the announcement that the U.S. Department of Education would not grant waivers of federal testing requirements. The new version of HB 67 would do the following:

For the 2020-21 school year, permits students to use course grade in lieu of scores on end-of-course exams to satisfy conditions for a high school diploma

Permits schools to grant a diploma in the 2021 school year to a student on track to graduate and for whom the principal, in consultation with teachers and counselors, determines the student has successfully completed high school curriculum or individualized education program

Exempts schools from administering the state required American history end-of-course exam

Extends testing windows later in the school year and requires deadline extensions related to assessments

Requires ODE to seek a waiver from federal accountability and school identification requirements

Pushes back the deadline for school district/building report cards to October 14

OEA supports HB 67. The lack of a federal waiver of testing requirements was hugely disappointing.

However, HB 67 attempts to make the best of a bad situation. The bill offers some additional flexibility

and, importantly makes sure that test results on this year's end-of-course exams are not a barrier to graduation. Even those who support testing have stated that this year's tests shouldn't be tied to punitive measures or high-stakes decisions. For our high school students, their pathway to graduation has incredibly high stakes. HB 67 will need to pass as an emergency measure in order to have an impact. HB 67 is scheduled for its first hearing in the Senate on Tuesday and OEA will testify in support of the bill.

### **Feds say K-12 School Tests Can Be Delayed, Not Canceled**

The U.S. Department of Education on Monday (2-22-21) announced flexibility, but not full cancellation, for this spring's federally required K-12 tests, as schools continue to adapt to COVID-19 impact.

The guidance says that tests will still be administered in some form, but they could be shorter, or given online, or delayed until fall. USDOE did say that states will be allowed to request a waiver of federal accountability standards tied to test participation levels and performance.

Spokeswoman Mandy Minick said Monday evening that the Ohio Department of Education had just received the federal letter, so no formal decisions on how to proceed had been made at the state level. Ohio legislators and education officials have already had discussions about waiving any potential consequences for students and schools tied to test performance. There is likely strong support for that idea.

There has been more disagreement over whether to give the tests at all. State Senate President Matt Huffman has argued that the tests themselves should still take place to measure student progress during a tumultuous year. Republicans in the House have introduced a bill in favor of canceling the tests, saying schools need to concentrate on teaching material rather than testing.

The USDOE guidance recognized that schools "may wish to prioritize learning time during the scant in-person schooling time this year."

Most of Ohio's public school students take state reading and math tests each spring from third to eighth grade, science tests in fifth and eighth grade, and seven end-of-course exams at various times across their high school years. Of those 21 tests, 17 are federally mandated.

State tests were canceled in spring 2020, as Gov. Mike DeWine shuttered school buildings in mid-March and the federal government issued waivers as the coronavirus pandemic took hold.

In 2020-21, some students have been physically attending school five days a week all year, while others have been learning from their homes for 11 months straight, and a third group has been doing a "hybrid" mix of in-person and online learning.

Preliminary results from two state tests that were administered in the fall (kindergarten readiness and third-grade reading) showed that overall scores were "notably lower than past years," especially for Black and low-income students, and for those students who had not yet returned to in-person classes.

"The Department of Education is committed to supporting all states in assessing student learning during the pandemic to help target resources and support to the students with the greatest needs," said Ian Rosenblum, acting U.S. assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education. "We also recognize that at a time when everything in our education system is different, there needs to be (flexibility)."

USDOE said it recognizes individual states may have special circumstances, so it is "prepared to work with states to address their individual needs and conditions while ensuring the maximum available statewide data to inform the targeting of resources and support." The federal announcement said state and local report card requirements will remain in place, but without ratings normally tied to test results.

Some education groups have said state tests should be canceled, because schools can use their regular diagnostic tests to more quickly and efficiently learn where students stand and what help they need.

The federal testing news, announced just after 6 p.m. Monday, was a bit of a surprise. State superintendent Paolo DeMaria, asked by the Dayton Daily News about any testing developments just after 4 p.m., said there was nothing new as of that moment and that Ohio was "captive to the feds. We will wait to hear word from them."