



To: LMEA Members

Update on LDOE Guidance/August 20, 2021

On August 13, 2021, LMEA sent to officials at the State Department of Education and Department of Health a request to reconsider opening school guidance as pertains to rehearsal of band, vocal, and singing classes.

Our request was to replace their current wording with an alternate solution. The wording we have suggested is: *“Due to the Governor’s indoor mask mandate (Proclamation 137), band, vocal, and singing classes should only occur indoors if music teachers and students adhere to the masking and distancing mitigation guidelines as provided by the National Association for Music Education and National Federation of High Schools. If such guidelines cannot be followed, then band, vocal, and singing classes may only occur outdoors until further notice.”*

We made clear that we believe music teachers can comply with the intent of the Governor’s proclamation by adhering to NAFME/NFHS safety protocols. We stated that we are in support of efforts to protect students and adults in our schools. We reiterated our willingness as music educators to do our part in ensuring the safety and welfare of our students.

The responses from both the Health and Education Departments vary slightly but send the same basic message. Neither Department acknowledges the recommendations of NAFME/NFHS as an alternative in their responses. As of today, neither Department appears willing to immediately discuss the issue.

Officially, the Health Department response points to the dire circumstance the Louisiana health system is currently facing and to the great sacrifices that are being made by health providers in protecting our students and citizenry.

The Education Department response does recognize that the current guidance impedes music instruction but does not wish to discuss a change in guidance until there is a significant improvement in COVID statistic in Louisiana.

The undercurrent is that State officials are collectively holding their breath through the first few weeks of school. They are concerned that Louisiana COVID numbers will surge even higher putting hospitals and medical staff in an untenable position.

Compounding our difficulty in getting the “indoor rehearsal” issue discussed, is the efforts by some Louisiana citizens who wish to remove the mask mandate in schools altogether. The chaotic scene, such as witnessed at a recent BESE meeting, hinders our request from getting fair consideration. We find our concern buried beneath a much broader controversy.

There is some good news. LMEA’s statewide effort in conjunction with local efforts, by various LMEA members, have resulted in progress with various district superintendents. Some district school leaders do interpret “should” as being different from “shall” in the current LDOE guidance. They believe they have a choice in the matter and have exercised a choice.

Even more encouraging is that these district leaders are embracing the NAFME/NFHS findings, recommendations, and best practices. They believe that their school districts will be in compliance with the Governor’s proclamation by adopting the NAFME/NFHS guidelines. Some of these districts have made modifications to the NAFME/NFHS guidelines to strengthen protection and guarantee compliance. Most importantly, they believe their students are safe when protocols are followed.

The local efforts made by parents of music students in these school districts has had a positive impact in that they were seeking a reasonable change rather than radical change. The many parental emails and correspondences directed at elected officials remained generally positive and supportive of safety measures while pointing out that “indoor rehearsals” with masking/distancing mitigations were far superior to rehearsing in 100-degree heat indices while dodging downpours.

Some parents did address the inequities in the Governor’s masking proclamation in their letters to officials. While LMEA as an organization is aware of the inequities, it remains focused on the music education issue and our proposed solution.

Bottom line:

1. LMEA has planted the flag with the appropriate State officials.
2. In some school districts, parents have chosen to rally around that flag by contacting elected and appointed officials at the local and/or State level.
3. Directors encouraged parents to focus on the application of NAFME/NFHS protocols during indoor rehearsals rather than asking for an exemption from the masking mandate.
4. Some district superintendents have also made tough decisions to implement changes that align with LMEA's proposal.

Next steps:

1. LMEA will continue to petition the Departments of Education and Health.
2. Local LMEA members should provide parents of their music students with LMEA's proposed solution plus NAFME/NFHS information.
3. Parents need to contact local officials with their request for a reasonable change in the district's "indoor rehearsal" guidance with emphasis on NAFME/NFHS recommendations as a viable alternative.
4. For the time being, our best path for change is through the local district superintendents.

A change in guidance at the State departmental level remains possible. But the current environment of passionate anti-mask citizens and the alarming rate of COVID infections/hospitalizations state-wide, may make any State level discussion difficult in the short term.

It is very important that all parties remain positive. Our cause will be diminished if we attempt to belittle or demonize anyone.

Officials are facing a multitude of challenges and issues beyond our request. We applaud those district superintendents who have made changes in alignment with our proposal. We understand that not all local superintendents feel comfortable with making a change at this time. LMEA and parents of our music students must respect that while continuing to influence their decision with positive and rational efforts.

In closing, I can assure you that from the very first day of the pandemic right up to this very day, I have worked on your behalf through contacts with governmental officials. I have repeatedly communicated your concerns, through a myriad of letters, emails, phone calls, and zoom meetings. Likewise, I have gathered and shared national research and recommendations with appropriate officials on a regular basis. I thank all the many LMEA members and national allies who have

assisted me in this effort. I remain grateful for the opportunity to serve as your President during these challenging times.

Scotty Walker, President
Louisiana Music Educators Association