

# Louisiana moving to Phase 3 with mask mandate in place; it's not a 'lifting of all restrictions'

BY WILL SENTELL STAFF WRITER PUBLISHED SEP 10, 2020 AT 10:30 AM | UPDATED SEP 10, 2020 AT 12:38 PM



Governor John Bel Edwards smiles, after a reporter's request for details after Edwards said there would be few given, at a press conference on Thursday, Sept. 10, 2020 announcing that Louisiana would be going in to Phase 3 coronavirus restrictions on Friday. 'You want me to give you something? The mask mandate will stay in place,' he said.

STAFF PHOTO BY TRAVIS SPRADLING

Will Sentell

Calling it his toughest decision during the coronavirus pandemic, Gov. John Bel Edwards said Thursday the state will move to Phase 3 for the reopening of its economy amid an improving picture in the fight against the deadly virus.

"We have done better of late," Edwards told reporters.

"That is what the data represents. That is why we are making the decision we made."

"The data is positive enough that we will be going in to Phase 3 tomorrow," he said.

The announcement is expected to mean looser restrictions for restaurants, retail stores, churches, gyms and possibly bars, and a morale boost for residents after six months of turmoil.

However, the governor said he will spell out exactly what Phase 3 will look like on Friday, and he repeatedly urged Louisiana residents not to assume that a new phase means the pandemic is over.



**Dr. Alex Billioux, public face of Louisiana's coronavirus response, to step down at end of month**

How long the state will be in the new phase is unclear, and what data was used to justify it is also expected to be detailed.

The current Phase 2 rules expire on Friday.

What impact Hurricane Laura will have on the spread of the virus in already hard-hit southwest Louisiana was one concern about implementing looser rules.

Whether the state sees a surge of positive cases after Labor Day, which happened after Memorial Day, also lingered over the decision.

Edwards said his fear is that "people will hear what they want to hear as opposed to what they are being told. We have to be extremely careful with this."

"We will be somewhat anxious over the next three weeks to get that data in," he said.

Edwards said that, if the state experiences a third surge of cases, he will act "pretty quickly" knowing the flu season is near, and the possibility that flu and coronavirus cases could again threaten the state's hospital capacity.



### **Hospitals in Acadiana see ICU bed shortages as Lafayette public schools prepare to reopen**

"We need people to do their part," he said.

"That is how we can strike the right balance between public health and having our economy opened on the other."

Guidelines spelled out by the White House and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say Phase 3 means the Phase 2 limits of 50% on indoor and outdoor capacity at restaurants will be lifted while physical distancing rules stay in place.

The same benchmarks say movie theaters, museums, zoos and aquariums will have their capacity raised to 50% of capacity, or up to 1,000 people.

Gyms and fitness centers will have their capacity boosted from 30% to 75%.

Phase 3 could also trigger a big hike in the number of in-person classes in public schools, which are mostly operating with a combination of personal instruction and distance learning.

State education officials envision school bus capacity rising from 50% to 75%, which has been a major issue in how many students return to classrooms.

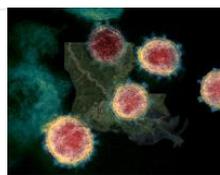


### **Louisiana schools are grappling with laptop shortages, saying 'the backup is unbelievable'**

Maximum group sizes would rise from 25 to 50, including adults, and children could resume contact/high risk sports, according to the state Department of Education.

However, Edwards is not required to follow every detail of national Phase 3 guidelines in spelling out what the new rules will look like in Louisiana.

The state for months has been a national leader for cases of the virus per capita.



**Louisiana coronavirus: 155,419 cases | 4,991 dead | 762 in hospital | 140,440 recovered**

Officials Thursday reported 499 new cases of the coronavirus, well below daily totals compared to earlier this year.

A total of 21 residents died from the virus, or 4,991 in all.

Hospitalizations of coronavirus patients decreased by 20 people on Thursday. Patients requiring ventilators increased by two.

Before the announcement Thursday there was an widespread expectation that the state would move to Phase 3 because of improved numbers.



**Are parts of south Louisiana ready to move to a Phase 3 reopening? Many 'are nowhere close'**

Officials in Jefferson and St. Tammany parishes each made separate pleas to Edwards last week to allow Louisiana parishes where the virus is under control to open up before the rest of the state.

But experts warned that such a piecemeal approach could be risky in a state that just suppressed its second major wave of infections and urged caution amid a series of converging events — including school openings and displacements from Hurricane Laura — that are likely to cause another rise in cases.

Edwards has previously come under fire from House Republicans, including charges that he was moving too slow to reopen the economy.

House Speaker Clay Schexnayder, R-Gonzales, offered qualified praise for Thursday's news.

"I am encouraged by the governor's announcement that the state will be moving into Phase 3 of reopening," Schexnayder said. "It is past time."