

11/20/2020

Highland CUSD No. 5 Parents and staff,

The 2020 school year is going to live in the history books as one of the most challenging ever. We have said since Day 1 (March 17) that everything we are doing is fluid. We have adapted and prevailed when faced with many challenges this school year. I have tried to take opportunities to lift folks up and praise our heroes. I still can't manage to satisfy my desire to pour praises on our teachers, assistants, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, administrators, custodians and maintenance workers, office workers, students, parents, and community enough. Many communities are tearing themselves apart with the divisiveness of politics and this pandemic, but it is not happening in our community.

When we have needed help, help comes. When we needed support and encouragement, support and encouragement comes. When we have needed subs, subs come. I am truly touched by the spirit our community continues to display when faced with adversity. Here's the deal though, it's not over. Yes, there is great news coming out that a vaccination is just around the corner and normalcy may return in the coming months. We still have to manage our daily challenges to make it through Christmas break.

I do have a couple of important updates to cover, reminding everyone about the fluidity of the situation. We were informed within the last couple of days that the Madison County Health Department has been overwhelmed and will look to school districts to do contact tracing and communicate with families about quarantines. We have been doing much of this work up to this point, but referred all questions regarding quarantine lengths to them. Now, we will be communicating and providing documentation for quarantines and the dates of which students and staff are allowed to return to school. This will continue to test the administration and nurses as we move forward.

I need everyone to understand that the rules are provided to us, not created by us. One protocol we have been asked to reconsider is when students/parents call a student in sick. We are supposed to follow up with the student and see what the reasons are for the absence. If showing any symptoms of COVID, which is pretty much anything at this point, students are provided a number of paths to return to school. They can quarantine for 14 days and demonstrate that no symptoms are present, visit the doctor and provide an alternative diagnosis, or demonstrate a negative COVID test. This is simply the rules our school administrators and nurses are being asked to enforce. They are not popular with many families, we know this. But, this is how it is and will be for the foreseeable future.

You are all probably aware of the tier 3 mitigations ordered by Governor Pritzker to take effect today, Friday, November 20. These additional mitigations do not impact schools at this point. It will be particularly important that we exercise good judgement in the school guidance put forward so that the decision to remain in-person remains a local decision. We believe our ability to make decisions locally is best policy since circumstances differ greatly across the state of Illinois. We have welcomed the pressures of making those decisions in the best interests of our students and staff.

The huge spike in positive COVID rates across the state and nation have decision makers in tail spins. Our local experience this week has been much improved from the last two weeks. Highland Primary reported 2 confirmed positive staff members and 3 students quarantined. They also reported a majority of their quarantines returning to school this week. Highland Elementary reported 0 positive cases and 8 students quarantined due to outside exposures. Alhambra Primary reported zero cases this week.

Grantfork Elementary reported 1 confirmed student positive and 1 confirmed staff positive this week with 0 quarantines. Highland Middle School reported 1 confirmed student positive from an outside exposure resulting in 15 quarantine students. Highland High School reported 3 confirmed positive cases and 1 presumed positive case this week. They currently have 91 students currently on quarantine.

I do want to point out that the severity of COVID in children has been far less in our experience than that of adults (not always, but certainly most). This is why there is elevated concern with the number of cases and severity of COVID among our staff. We have had several staff deal with COVID and some have seen uncomfortable symptoms. This is why they continue to be characterized as heroes due to the unselfish dedication to continue in-person instruction. I hope and pray that we have continued good fortune to keep everyone safe and healthy through the holiday season. We can certainly use a couple of weeks to relax and recharge.

The best news I can offer at this point is that there are only 2 days of school next week. I am not sure what the update for next week will look like at this point, but I have no choice but to put something out due to the excellent reviews from most of you😊 Be safe and have a great weekend!

Sincerely,

Michael S. Sutton, Superintendent