

January 8, 2021,

Highland CUSD No. 5 Parents and Staff,

Happy New Year, can you believe how fast time passes even when you're not having fun? The year 2020 was a long difficult year for many in our country, state, and locally. It seems impossible that we have now been nine months since the initial lock downs on March 17, 2020. The two week Christmas break was a much needed and deserved break for students and staff. The new year is supposed to be a time to celebrate successes of the past year and map out goals for the coming year. We have many successes to celebrate from 2020, some were unrelated to the COVID pandemic and some were a result of how we responded in the midst of the pandemic.

Prior to the COVID pandemic consuming our every thought, we were very focused on the results of our strategic planning process. We were prioritizing items for a capital improvement plan and producing timelines for the projects to be completed. Once COVID hit we turned our entire focus to the safety and wellbeing of our students and staff by creating a Return to School Plan to allow students to stay in school. COVID has consumed every minute of every day since that point. I will be shifting some focus in the near future on some of the results of our strategic planning. I will focus on the prioritizations identified through the strategic planning process and seek feedback from our community. We are excited to turn some of our focus towards the short and long term needs of our school district.

Though we plan to focus on some strategic planning initiatives in the near future, we still have lots of work to do to ensure safety measures are continued during the COVID period. Some questions have surfaced about the ability of the district to mandate masks going forward. The Illinois Department of Public Health adopted emergency rules that include the mask mandate on January 4, 2021. I will not get into the details of this process or the time limits of such actions, but I will say that all mitigations Highland CUSD No. 5 has used since the first day of school remain as they were prior to Christmas break.

I want to go a little further on this topic. The mitigations that were put into place back in August were not choices of the district, they were expectations/requirements from the State to conduct in-person education services. We know that students need to have the option to be in school so we have bent over backwards to make that happen. We have NEVER added requirements or asked for more than what has been required from the Illinois Department of Public Health. That said, I believe strongly that the mitigations put in place since Day 1 (and our efforts to accommodate additional concerns) have been essential in creating a work and school environment that allows students and staff to come to school feeling safe on a daily basis. If masks were not required, we would almost certainly be fully remote.

Speaking of mitigations, I also want to encourage parents and staff alike to remember that when someone in your household has symptoms of COVID and plan to be tested, please keep all students and/or employees home until the results are known. The impact of a student or staff member coming to school when sick or potentially exposed can impact many other individuals through the quarantine rules. We have placed a lot of trust in parents and employees to sign the daily certification form in hopes that we can work together to protect everyone. We sincerely appreciate everyone's cooperation with this issue.

I suppose it is time to report the current numbers for the week. Please keep in mind that we are starting with a completely clean slate since Christmas break was 14 days long. I have asked each building to report the number of current COVID cases and quarantines. The numbers may not include situations that occurred and ended during the break. Highland Primary reported 2 staff positives and zero staff quarantines, 7 student positives and 23 students currently quarantined. Alhambra Primary reported 1 student positive and 8 students in quarantine, 1 staff positive. Highland Elementary reported 2 staff positives and zero quarantines, 3 student positives and 21 students currently quarantined. Grantfork Elementary reported 5 student quarantines and zero positives. Highland Middle School reported 2 staff positives and 2 staff currently on quarantine, 4 student positives and currently 27 students on quarantine. Highland High School reported 4 student positives and zero students quarantined and zero positive or quarantined staff members.

Every week I try to report numbers and important information while drawing attention to the fantastic efforts of our staff, students and community. I think some may just look at the numbers and say they are what they are or perhaps think we simply treat all of this information as just numbers. I want to point out that with each one of these situations is a family that may have the means to deal with it and move on, others may have much more difficulty. I tried to keep up with each of the families who were impacted by COVID early on and lost the ability to individually track each situation. I was initially concerned whether the individual positive cases resulted in significant health issues. I continue to be concerned about this, but I can confirm there have been significant educational impact on students who have been forced to quarantine multiple times and missing many days of instruction. Some students do very well while others struggle significantly. We need to keep those students and families in our thoughts as we move forward.

We are in the midst of a country-wide vaccination roll out. I am hopeful to have some definitive dates after my meeting with the Madison County Health Department this afternoon regarding school staff vaccination availability. All school staff have been included in the 1B priority ranking, which allows them to receive the vaccination after the first responders and other top priority personnel. We are in the process of identifying the number of staff who desire to get vaccinated. We hope that vaccinations will be available as soon as mid-February. My future communications will include information regarding the availability of vaccinations to our students and staff.

Once again, Happy New Year to all of our students, parents, staff, and community. I am entering the new year thankful for being a part of this wonderful community and school district. I am excited to see what great accomplishments we can achieve in the new year. Have a wonderful weekend!

Sincerely,

Michael S. Sutton, Superintendent