

January 22, 2021

Highland CUSD 5 Parents and Staff,

It's been a long road to this point with lots of peaks and valleys. I had hoped that the valleys would become less impactful as we moved into the new year, especially with the optimism of vaccines being available. I am still not sure what the distribution timeline is for our staff and those who are most at risk when exposed to COVID. We continue to have conversations with MCHD about the process and timeliness of making vaccines available. I bring this up right out of the gate because my number one concern right now is how it impacts our ability to staff classrooms.

The distribution of vaccines to 1B is very complicated in Madison County compared to much smaller, or less populated, counties due to the availability of vaccines and the sheer number of individuals requesting the vaccine. The current plan is to prioritize the 1B list, including school staff, by age and requires waves of staff potentially to be released over a period of time, perhaps weeks, to get vaccinated. Each staff member will have to travel to a centralized vaccination site to receive the vaccination. A certain percentage of those receiving the vaccination may develop symptoms of COVID such as low-grade fever, cough, runny nose, etc. for 24 hours. We anticipate some staff absences will occur, thus creating difficulty in staffing our classrooms each time a wave of staff is selected for vaccination. This process would repeat itself for the 2nd dose of the vaccine as well. We are hopeful to see opportunities for vaccination outside of school hours to minimize this impact.

One thought might be to bring the vaccinations to the school and do mass vaccinations to lessen the impact or bring the vaccine to a local facility to reduce travel. I assure you that we are discussing every opportunity to make the process as efficient as possible. However, the overall picture of the county as a whole makes these decisions very difficult for the county. They have to present options that appear fair to all, so prioritizing districts or populations is proving to be a challenge. I bring this information to your attention not to solicit advice or call you to action, I provide this information to understand the situation if and when our ability to continue in-person learning is impacted.

For example, Tuesday we had 21 teachers absent, mostly due to COVID related illnesses or quarantines. If we were to have another 15-20 teachers being vaccinated that day, we would not have been able to conduct in-person learning. I fear at some point in the near future we may have to look at a short-term remote plan perhaps multiple times to manage the roll-out of vaccines. I still hold hope that we can find a way to work with MCHD to minimize these scenarios, but as we have done throughout the COVID era, we want to focus on the potential obstacles. As a result, please be prepared to be flexible and I appreciate everyone's cooperation in advance.

This week's COVID report: Highland Primary reported 2 positive students resulting in 15 quarantines, 1 presumptive staff positive due to outside exposure, 1 staff quarantine due to outside exposure, and 12 student quarantines due to outside exposure. Alhambra Primary reported zero new positive cases. Highland Elementary reported zero new positive cases for students or staff and 12 student quarantines from outside exposures and 1 staff quarantine from outside exposure. Grantfork Elementary reported zero new positive cases and only quarantines from outside exposures. Highland Middle School reported 4 staff positives and 7 staff members on quarantine, 2 student positives resulting in 11 student quarantines, 4 student quarantines due to outside exposures. Highland High School reported 2 student positives and 2 staff positives with 1 new quarantine from last week.

I would like to remind everyone that any days necessary to cancel school for inclement weather will be non-student attendance days. This means remote learning will not be utilized during these days. We hope that everyone can use those days for mental wellness, perhaps building a snow castle or simply snuggling up to a movie with a blanket☺ If a significant number of snow days were necessary, consideration may be given at that time to utilize remote learning days.

We have a Board of Education meeting on Monday, January 25 at 6:00 p.m. The meeting link will be sent out on Monday for those who would like to watch the live stream. That concludes this week's update. Please have a wonderful weekend, stay safe and warm!

Sincerely,

Michael S. Sutton, Superintendent