

May 14, 2021

Highland CUSD No. 5 Parents and Staff,

Today is the Highland High School graduation and I am so excited that it has finally come. I am excited because #1 I have a senior son who is graduating and #2 it signifies that this COVID year has almost come to an end. I am not one who normally does a countdown to the end of the school year, but this year has been a little different. It has been different for all of us. I was so moved to hear some of the senior comments at Baccalaureate services on Wednesday night and how they look at the pandemic as added preparation for college and/or life. They have persevered through many challenges and lost so many normal experiences throughout this year. I feel terrible for their losses, but encouraged by their resolve.

I want to get right into some real stuff. There was a big announcement yesterday that vaccinated individuals no longer are required to mask outside or inside with a few exceptions. Unfortunately, the school environment appears to be one of those exceptions. I am meeting with the MCHD this afternoon and expect some clarifications at that time. My biggest fear at this time is the thought that schools will eventually be expected to enforce one set of rules for those who have the vaccine and another set of rules for those who have not. Please state leaders, do not put us in that situation. We have no desire to encourage or discourage families into a decision that should be made on their own. That seems to be an appropriate way to start this really long weekly update.

On a lite note, a couple of weeks ago I included a link from the L.U.N.C.H. bunch for a survey regarding the summer meal needs. They reported a record number of responses from the survey. This voluntary group has now worked their magic and created a schedule for food distribution. If you are interested in the schedule, please access it here: <https://5il.co/sofs>. I again would like to thank this group for stepping up and serving a need in our community.

This will be the last weekly update that the following dates are relevant☺:

- Last Day of School – Thursday, May 20th
 - HP and HE dismiss at 11:00 a.m.
 - AP and GE dismiss at 11:05 a.m.
 - HMS and HHS dismiss at 12:35 p.m.
- HHS Final Exams for 9-11 grades – May 19th and May 20th

We have many other important dates for programs, banquets, etc. Information for those events will be communicated through the appropriate channels.

Now, let's get into the heavy stuff. In preparation for continued questions regarding mask mandates for next year, we have begun researching possible impacts of not following CDC, IDPH, and local health department guidance on mitigations. I believe it is untimely to be having this discussion in May for what is going to happen in August, but hey, you gotta do what you gotta do. No, we are not saying that this is on the table, but we need to be prepared for the challenging questions that are being asked by parents and community members who think we need to challenge the state mandates. The word "guidance" is used loosely because when you get right down to it, it is not guidance, it is a requirement.

I want to begin by stressing that we have to the extent possible respected the parent's right to make family decisions rather than force actions that infringe on what we believe is their responsibility. For example, we began the year by trusting parents to assess their child on a daily basis for any symptoms that might necessitate the child being kept home. We did not do universal daily screenings of children as they walked in the door. We communicated from day 1 that students would not be socially distanced in various places in the school buildings throughout the day, which would result in larger numbers of quarantines (knowing that all kids needed to be in school every day). Many districts moved to full remote learning when they had a case of COVID, we stayed in-person and dealt with the emotions, fear, and challenges of quarantines. We did these things with the support and encouragement of our students, staff, parents, and community.

I have reviewed an opinion from our counsel regarding the result of three lawsuits that stemmed from the alleged lack of authority granted by the legislature to the entity attempting to impose various COVID 19 safety rules (ranging from the local school board to the Governor of Illinois). In all three cases brought forth the theory has proven unsuccessful at every level of state court. It appears that the issue of authority has been resolved. We also know that a group including Governor Pritzker filed suit against three school boards in July, 2020 who announced their refusal to follow the IDPH/ISBE public health guidelines. In August the circuit court of Sangamon County granted an injunction and ordered the districts to comply with the Governor's executive order, including use of PPE and face masks. This decision was again upheld on appeal.

I would like to go into detail about the process by which Governor Pritzker has been given the authority to issue executive orders and the timelines that exist, but I would be sending a book to cover many of those details. Let's just say that it appears the Governor has the authority and there is no reason to believe that authority is going to change anytime soon. It is generally extended in 150 day increments.

That provides just a little legal background of this situation. There are other fears that must be considered as well. One thing that has allowed Highland CUSD No. 5 to be successful this year in its effort to maintain in-person learning has been our commitment to keep our students and staff safe. If we were to not follow protocol, one concern would be the continued support and dedication of our staff. No, we have not surveyed them nor do we plan to at this time. But, if we were to make masks optional, would staff feel like their safety was being compromised? What if they didn't feel comfortable coming to school? Do we have any way to ensure that classrooms are staffed? Do they get paid? Do we have any recourse? All questions that are unanswered at this time. In addition, we plan to run a full, normal schedule next year due to the limited numbers of students who will be in remote learning. How many additional students would request remote learning if we are not following the "guidance"? What if we said no? At what point does this prevent us from offering a full, normal schedule because of staff reassignment? All of these questions enter picture if we do not follow the "guidance" provided by our state agencies.

One last consideration, respect for law? We have the upmost respect for our law enforcement agencies and want our community to know how important they are in making our lives safe. What is the message we send by saying we are going to pick and choose what rules we live by? If we don't like the rules, we should pursue legal and appropriate ways to address our concerns. I know, we live in Illinois and all branches of government are controlled by one party. That is a fact, but to what end will refusing to follow the rules accomplish any of our educational goals. I hear "someone needs to stand up for our

youth". Yes, I agree and that is why we have stood up to provide in-person learning this entire year. Our staff stepped up tremendously throughout this year through many roadblocks and I extend a pat on the back to them.

I hope that my efforts to provide some background to the idea of following or not following protocol is taken in the spirit in which I meant it. I am not suggesting that we agree or disagree with the analysis of research or even the final decisions made by our legislative and appointed leaders. I want you to understand the multilayered challenges of the decisions we must make as a result of our leader's decisions. Something tells me that my efforts will be ongoing☺

COVID numbers this week: Highland Primary reported 1 new positive case resulting 1 new staff quarantine and 8 student quarantines. They also reported 3 new quarantines due to outside exposure. Alhambra Primary reported zero positive cases and 3 student quarantines due to outside exposure. Highland Elementary reported zero new positive cases and zero student quarantines. Grantfork Elementary reported zero new positive cases and zero new student quarantines. Highland Middle School reported 1 new positive staff case, resulting in 1 staff quarantine and 6 student quarantines. Highland High School reported zero new positive cases and zero new quarantines.

That concludes this week's very lengthy update. I wish you all a wonderful and safe weekend. Go Bulldogs!

Sincerely,

Michael S. Sutton, Superintendent