

August 13, 2021

Highland CUSD No. 5 Parents and Staff,

Despite the tremendous challenges we are currently dealing with, I am very excited for the start of a new school year. On Wednesday, we will welcome back our students after months of experiences that vary greatly among them. I have found it extremely difficult to put together any kind of message that brings families of our district together rather than divide them. Last school year was a difficult year, but together we conquered it. With all of us working together, we can do it again. The focus of this message is simply going to be a summary of what to expect to start the school year.

Illinois Governor, J.B. Pritzker issued an Executive Order on August 4, 2021, increasing mitigation measures in public and non-public schools serving students in grades PK-12 to include a requirement for all individuals to wear face masks while indoors, regardless of vaccination status. For the duration of this Executive Order, the issue of wearing a mask is no longer a local decision. We are hopeful that the level of transmission will soon lessen, and that the CDC (and IDPH) are able to adjust their existing recommendations to again allow this decision to be made locally. The Return to School plan will remain fluid. To access the full Return to School Plan for 2021-2022, please use the following link:
<https://5il.co/x4so>

While I understand there are strong opinions on both sides of this issue, I would like to take a moment to highlight some things (relative to where we were in May of this year) that we can take a deep breath and be thankful for:

- Students will be able to attend full days of school.
- Students will eat lunch at school.
- Students will have access to the playground.
- Masks do not have to be worn by students or guests while outside.
- There are no capacity limits to school events.
- Classroom contact tracing for quarantine purposes of masked individuals is within three feet, lowered from six feet, reducing the number of students that will be quarantined.
- Vaccinated individuals that are close contacts do not have to quarantine.
- There will be no contact tracing for outdoor exposures to positive cases.

While the current guidelines are subject to change, I'm hopeful we can all celebrate how far we have come and worked together to this point. The amount of support from our community, staff, and parents have made every effort extremely gratifying. Teachers, staff, and administrators have been working diligently to put plans into place to prepare for opening day. They have been terrific and want the experience of returning to school for all of our students to be a positive one. Last year seemed to go smoothly because we all had the same goal. To keep our student learning in person. I am afraid that this year will look a little different because goals are different for many parents and community members.

There is no question that COVID is still with us and will be for perhaps forever with mutations and variants and who knows what is in the future. The politicization of COVID and its mitigations have caused division within the community, state, and country. It has been frustrating for educators to see kids put in the middle of this battle. We are now in a no-win situation with many in our local

communities and even some within our own buildings. We will not quit the fight to advocate for ALL students, though it seems that when we advocate for some, others are left out.

There are some things that need to be addressed to ensure a peaceful return to school. When families choose to ignore the requirement for universal masking in our schools, they are putting our teachers and building administrators in extremely difficult positions. If you are upset by decisions that have been made, I encourage you to contact me as many of you already have. I also encourage you to take a road trip to Springfield or Chicago to do the same advocacy. That will likely not happen because you and I both know it does very little to impact change in this state. That's why these political issues are on our doorstep, tearing our community apart. We can only focus on what we now have and make the best of a terrible situation.

Here's the deal! On Wednesday, when school starts and the students enter our buildings they must wear a mask. This allows our teachers to teach and our students to learn in our classrooms with minimal distractions and quarantines. If students do not wear masks they will not be permitted to go in classrooms with students who are following the rules. Students who are not wearing masks will politely be asked to put on a mask. If that fails, they will likely be asked to report to the office. We will attempt to contact parents and have that conversation. If they continue to refuse a mask, we will ask that they are picked up from school. WE DO NOT WANT THIS, we want kids in school. This is why we worked so hard last year to keep in person learning a priority. No one is going to win this battle, especially our students. Why draw this line? We have no choice but to enforce the rules within our buildings. We are aware of the plans of parents to demand entry without masks. We are on the same team, but we cannot allow it. We have students coming to school because of the mitigations put in place. We have a duty to ensure the environment is what we say it is going to be.

I have attempted to be direct and honest in my communications throughout the COVID period as I am in this one. Please let me continue to communicate without concern of choosing my words differently. Because you have allowed me to be brutally honest, I can say that I believe in local control and personal freedoms just like many of you. I hate masks, COVID, and mandates just like many of you. But above all other things right now, partly due to my position, I value the education of our students more than anything else. I value the experiences our children will get if we do the things that have to be done. We cannot jeopardize education even for one year in order to "call a bluff" or "fight government overreach".

Please continue to support our district, pray for us, and show why Highland CUSD No. 5 is the best place for a kid to be. I wish a fantastic start to the school year to all of you. Thank you and I hope to see all of our students enthusiastically return to school on Wednesday!

Humbly and Sincerely,

Michael S. Sutton, Superintendent