

September 3, 2021

Highland CUSD No. 5 parents and staff,

It's hard to believe that we are already in week 3 of the school year. Many thought that the worst was behind us in terms of the pandemic and challenges. It is becoming crystal clear that the most difficult challenges are still ahead. The divisiveness of this issue has transcended into every community both small and large. I would love to bury my head in the sand and only focus on what I thought I had control of, and that is providing the best education services to our students. However, so many issues are forcing school leaders to dive deeply into the political arena where many sharks are swimming.

This is another weekly update that I am finding very difficult to pull people together rather than causing division. We are dealing with a hosts of rumors at this very moment that I prefer not contribute to rousing emotions, but I feel important to very address very narrowly. I have heard as many of you likely have that the Governor is talking about a shutdown and mandating vaccines for individuals 12 and older. Please be confident that any actions following any type of announcement will be thoroughly vetted and planned with thought and focus.

We have clearly demonstrated to our community and our staff that we support them and share concerns about many of the mandates coming through executive orders. We are still waiting for guidance on the latest executive order requiring staff to be vaccinated or submit to at least weekly testing. We are gathering a plethora of data to determine all of the potential actions at the district's disposal.

In the end, I hope that we can demonstrate our dedication to keeping kids in school while providing a safe environment and protecting the values and beliefs of our staff and community. We have an excellent school district with extremely dedicated teachers and staff to serve our community and families. Please do not rush to judgement or make hasty decisions so that we can work together to be successful as we have for the last 18 months.

I feel it necessary to address quarantines since it appears to be confusing to many parents and we are seeing courts get involved in solving some of these disputes. Let me make it clear that we understand that the school district does not have the authority to quarantine students and/or staff. When a positive case occurs, the school district assists the Madison County Health Department by providing information regarding potential close contacts. It is the responsibility of the MCHD to contact and communicate to each individual and/or family who should quarantine and the length of that quarantine. The MCHD only recognizes one length of quarantine – 14 days. Highland CUSD No. 5 has provided our families a number of shortened quarantine opportunities, all approved through the Illinois Department of Public Health and CDC. They are the 10 day, 7 day and test to stay options. I summarized them last week. All communication and coordination of the shortened quarantines are at the school building level, not MCHD. Our nurses are working very hard to allow these options to remain.

One problem occurs when a test comes back positive and close contacts are identified, but the MCHD resources prevent them from immediately communicating to these families. There is a delay in action that if our nurses and administrators are not monitoring would allow for students to come into the school environment during a crucial time when exposure could cause additional impact on other students and/or staff. During this time there may be communication with our folks that recommend

voluntary quarantine until the MCHD makes contact with the family. I had a meeting with our administrators and nurses this week to make clear that we have no authority to prevent a student in this situation from returning to school, but encouraged them to appeal to our parent's good sense and judgement to assist us in making our school environment as safe as possible. If the MCHD fails in proper communication, we can only ask for cooperation from our families.

I hope this brings some clarity to the difficult positions our front line staff are in on a daily basis. On the front line it is not about politics, it is about protecting all of our students and staff from unnecessary risks. By the way, we are seeing very few quarantines this year resulting from in school situations thanks to the efforts of our administrators and teachers to manage classes to keep students 3 feet apart (a change in the social distance from last year).

I will now take an opportunity to acknowledge and congratulate the L.U.N.C.H. Bunch on another successful year. This is a true community effort of local churches and organizations led by Missy Loyet to oversee and fund this wonderful outreach program. This group was responsible for providing an average of 138.75 lunches over 58 days to our families in need. This means 8047 lunches were provided during the summer months this year and a total of 31,764 lunches over the last 5 years. Thank you to the LUNCH Bunch for your continued efforts to serve our community.

COVID numbers for this week as reported by each building: Highland Primary reported 1 student positive case and 12 student quarantines all due to outside exposure. Alhambra Primary reported zero positives and zero quarantines for the week. Highland Elementary reported 1 student positive, 6 new quarantines from outside exposure and 1 staff quarantine from outside exposure. Grantfork Elementary reported zero positive cases and zero quarantines for the week. Highland Middle School reported 1 staff positive case, 4 student positive cases, and 10 student quarantines from outside exposures. Highland High School reported 11 student positive cases and 1 student quarantine. Some transmission may have been linked through athletic activities and we continue to monitor these situations. It appears our mitigations within the school environment are very effective in preventing transmission to this point and we hope that positive trend continues.

At this point, I believe the year is off to a great start! Fingers crossed that focus on continued in-person learning is prioritized at the state level and we can continue to ignite bright futures to build a better community. That's all for this week, have a fantastic Labor Day weekend!

Sincerely,

Michael S. Sutton, Superintendent