

January 14, 2022

Highland CUSD Parents and Staff,

I hope everyone had a wonderful holiday season and great start to the new year. All things considered we are off to another great start for the new year. I should probably put that in perspective, however, because the new year has also presented a number of imminent challenges that we are facing. I would like to focus on some of the great things that are going on like the fact that the sun has come up every day so far during the new year☺ All joking aside, the Highland Board of Education recently approved a number of projects to move forward on so I would like to take a little time to address those. Then I am afraid we have to get into the weeds a little on some topics that may make some uncomfortable.

So, at the December board meeting the BOE approved turf to be installed on the Highland High School football field. We have been discussing this for many years and have finally committed to the project. There are a number of local businesses and large companies coming on board to assist with the financing of the project as well as some other improvements at the stadium in the near future. It is exciting to see projects like this because of the positive impact it has on the number of activities that become available to the district as a result. I don't have the numbers in front of me, but the number of student activities we anticipate at the stadium will increase by 5 times with a turf surface. With the fundraising currently occurring and the revenue opportunities, we hope the project will be cost neutral over the life of the turf. Not to mention, most schools in the area we compete with have already installed turf fields or are in the process of doing so.

In addition to this, we have projects at Alhambra Primary and Grantfork Elementary scheduled to break ground once school is out of session. These projects will address safety and security issues at their front entrances. The purpose was not to create barriers between our families and school, but to protect our students and staff throughout the school day. We look forward to showcasing the new front entrances when school resumes for the 2022-2023 school year.

The last set of projects I want to mention are the top priorities in our most recent strategic planning sessions. I remind you that we had over 70 individuals involved in numerous meetings over the span of several months to discuss issues such as staffing, finances, technology, safety, security, curriculum, community relations, facility needs, programmatic needs as well as revising the district's mission statement. From all of those meetings a number of priorities were identified in each of the areas. The facility needs were prioritized making Highland Primary the number one priority from a safety and security standpoint. We can talk about the traffic issues and dangers of moving around on that campus during school start and end times, but that wasn't even the worst of it. It was the fact that students are under three different roofs and must travel through the parking lot at various times during the day to get from one class to another or for lunch and those types of things. These are kids from 3 yrs. To 7 yrs. moving between buildings. Before COVID, the big topic (and still is, but we don't talk about it as much) was safety and security of buildings. This situation definitely describes cause for concern. I will provide more information on this project in the near future.

Another top priority is the need to expand some classroom space at Highland Middle School. Yes, moving 6<sup>th</sup> grade to the middle school a few year ago accelerated the significance of this issue, but the school is currently busting at the seams for additional space. This is the most beautiful school in the district and modifications need to be made to improve the operational function as well as expand some

vocational opportunities to our students. We have discussed the possibility of adding 8 classrooms and a small vocational space to draw distinct boundaries between each of the grade levels within the building.

The third and final project within this set is a second gym at Highland High School. This has also been a long-time need and many discussions have occurred over the years. We realize there are only so many dollars and the possibility exists that if costs are high for the previous two projects, this project may be squeezed a little or completely. The fact is we serve in some years nearly 1000 students at Highland High School and only have one gym space for activities during the school day and beyond. The demand for gym space is great and kids are coming and going from 5:30 a.m. to after 10 p.m. many nights during the year to make things work. We currently have our workout equipment in the old garage near the stadium and would love to incorporate a space in this area for exercise equipment for our students and athletes. I will provide additional details on the needs as we engage the community over the next several months.

This update may become the longest since I began sending them out, but it is important to at least briefly describe how all of this is being considered at this time. The three projects I have just described (Highland Primary, Highland Middle School, Highland High School) will be included in a referendum question on the ballot in June of 2022. We have not received specific numbers for estimated costs and financial information, but I want to briefly explain how this is going to work. For years the district has managed finances in a very conservative manner. When times were tough, we made reductions and made cuts to balance the budget rather than come to the community for permanent tax rate increases (one emergency Working Cash Bond a few years ago was a temporary increase). This has allowed the district to position itself for all of its current debt to be paid off in the next 5 years. As the bond payments are paid off, the tax rate will decrease.

We are currently in a position that we think we can complete these projects and not increase the current tax rate. We currently have one of the lower tax rates in the area and I will provide information to back that up in the near future. So, you will hear many times over the next several months about this being a “no tax rate increase”, but I want to address right now and openly that this is not a “no tax increase”. To explain, if the projects are voted down, the tax rate will decrease. If they are approved, the tax rate stays the same. I plan to provide much information over the next several months demonstrating more in depth all of the things I have covered in the last several paragraphs. Please be patient for information coming out and there will be a multitude of opportunities to engage the BOE and myself in question and answer type formats as we get closer to June.

Now I want to turn my attention to some current events that we are all tired of hearing and talking about. Throughout this school year, I have heard from many of you about the mitigations for COVID. Some think the district should do more to make students and staff safe, some think we have overstepped our authority in requiring masks and quarantines. Most of you have been very patient and supportive knowing that we are doing everything we can to provide the best learning environment for our students. I would argue that to this point we have not had much of a say in the mitigations at the local level, some disagree. I am coming to you with the following information to proactively address a potential situation that could occur as early as next week. Many districts are sending messages out this week and dealing with the situation in many different ways. What are you talking about?

Highland CUSD No. 5 is currently a defendant (along with 145 other school districts, the Governor, ISBE, and IDPH) in two different lawsuits regarding masks, vaccines, and quarantines. There is **POTENTIAL** for a court ordered restraining order against enforcing the mask and vaccine requirements. The mask litigation would impact both students and staff. I won't get into the weeds on the arguments from either side, but I want to make clear that our focus on in-person learning will remain a priority. If we receive a court order to cease enforcing the mask and vaccine mandates (vaccine mandates only impact employees), we will follow the court order likely starting the next day. I will make every attempt to provide an update immediately upon knowledge of the result. I do not anticipate and changes in our current schedules or how we are currently providing educational services. As has been the case all along, we will be in-person until we can't. I have been amazed at the community support of our local teachers and staff as well as the administration throughout the COVID pandemic. So, I ask again for the cooperation and patience to allow us to work through all of the challenges that result from such an outcome **IF** in fact it occurs. Many districts are planning alternative ways to deal with the potential results, but you need to know, whether you agree or not, how we plan to proceed.

The last couple of weeks have been very challenging from a staffing standpoint. We have averaged between 65-80 employees out every day since returning from the holidays. I would say most of these absences are COVID related. Our staff and administration are taking on daily responsibilities far beyond what would normally be expected and doing it with a high degree of pride and professionalism to make things work. They continue to do this because it has become clear that our students need in-person learning. We have certainly seen the highest number of positive cases in recent weeks than during any time throughout the pandemic. We have been fortunate that only two cases that I am aware of resulted in hospitalization, one is now fully recovered (several months ago) and the other is home recovering as this update is being created.

The weekly COVID numbers as reported by each building are as follows: Highland Primary reported 8 new positive staff members, 11 new positive students, and 25 students currently in quarantine. Alhambra Primary reported 4 new positive staff, 6 new student positives and 10 students currently in quarantine. Highland Elementary reported 4 new positive staff and 12 new positive students with 1 staff and 12 students in quarantine. Grantfork Elementary reported 3 new positive students and 13 quarantined students. Highland Middle School reported 7 new positive students, 18 students in quarantine and 9 students pending test results. Highland High School reported 4 new positive staff, 23 new positive students, and 3 quarantined staff.

Obviously, the numbers are much higher than at any time during COVID, BUT data also shows that the symptoms from the current Omicron variant are much more mild than in some of the previous variants. Data also shows that we are near the peak of the current wave and should start to see some relief very soon. In fact, the number of cases at the end of this week seem to be down from last week and the beginning of this week. I want to emphasize that students and staff should NOT be at school if they do not feel well. This should be agreeable amongst everyone whether we are in a pandemic or not. We are hopeful the 3-day weekend will be helpful for our students and staff to mend and get back to health.

I realize that we covered a variety of topics in this update and there were some dramatic shifts in the topics. I have to devote some time to the projects coming up and at the same time provide information and updates regarding the pandemic. We might have some lengthy updates in the future as well. I

appreciate you taking the time to read the entire update and hope everyone has a safe and wonderful weekend. Snow day tomorrow, ENJOY!!!

Sincerely,

Michael S. Sutton, Superintendent