



Web Release/Open Letter to Parents/Thoughts of Fall

May 29, 2020

As we near the official end of the school year on June 5, 2020, I thought I should take a few moments and share out where planning is going for the fall of 2020. In attending multiple meetings (face-to-face, via Zoom, Google, etc.)—from those with the governor, state senators, state representatives, Wexford-Missaukee Intermediate School District, Public Health Department, and other entities—our administrative team, school improvement teams, and teaching staff have been working through various scenarios as we prepare for the 2020-2021 school year.

We all hope for a “normal” opening of school, with fall sports and face-to-face instruction.

School in the Fall of 2020

We are meeting quite frequently—with more meetings next week—in an attempt to design how school will look this upcoming fall. It has not been easy. Will we be face-to-face or remote? Will we be asked to operate a hybrid (open school, but with social distancing restrictions)? What would a hybrid look like? How do we keep kids six-feet apart all day? Split schedules? Do we run classes 6 a.m. to 11 a.m. and then another group from Noon to 5 p.m.? Can we even keep two Kindergarten students six feet away from each other all day, much less the whole class? Are we being asked to do that or any of this? Will staff be required to teach with masks on all day long? Will kids be required to wear masks? What happens if a mask is lost? How will we bus without kids sitting too close to one another? Lots of questions. Easy to get lost or frustrated.

Governor Whitmer has assigned a 20-member Return to Learning Advisory Council with the task of advising her on how to reopen schools. This may include returning as if we hadn't skipped a beat, “normal,” if you will, or we may be issued the order of opening, but only using distance or remote learning strategies (online, instructional and assessment packets, or a combination thereof), or a hybrid opening with face-to-face instruction but while maintaining social distancing and wearing PPE's like masks and gloves. [I hope not. The CDC proposed guidelines for reopening schools leave much to be desired when it comes to imagining a quality public school. You can *Google* them and see what you think.]

A handful of professional organizations, like MASA and MEMPSA have also put similar groups together to advise/lobby our state government and assist school systems in reopening. So, we wait for guidance. We wait for the political chess game that shouldn't be taking place to come to an end. I believe our legislature and government are run with the best of intentions, but I am ultimately, a school teacher, coach, principal, now a superintendent. In trying to plan for everything, I am worried we are planning for nothing. So, I hope we can sort out the budget and communicate to schools—soonest—what our per pupil funding will look like so we can plan for success!

While we are waiting for the word to come down from Lansing, we are unfortunately watching the calendar and the clock spin. School budgets, by law, must be approved by local school boards prior to the end of June. Usually, we are creating budgets based on some financial idea from the state as to what kind of funding per pupil we will receive—and we certainly should have it by now. In fact,



Pine River Area Schools

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we usually know our exact foundation allowance by May and can thus plan our schedules, staffing, and curriculum adjustments. This year, that is not the case. We have only been told that there is a \$1.12 billion shortfall in the School Aid Fund for *this school year* and a projected loss of up to \$2 billion for *next school year*. So, the state could take up to \$700 per student from us this year and because the state's budget year ends on September 30, that would mean a serious lack of operating money as we enter into next school year. We have also been told we stand to lose up to \$2,027 per student for next year. I'm not sure what school would look like with that kind of financial hit, but it would be devastating. Massive program cuts would have to happen to keep the doors open. We need to know our funding allowance and we need that information yesterday.

Not good for schools as we are expected to make payroll for staff and deliver quality instructional programming for all kids. Staff, students, and parents are experiencing stress. State aid for school should not be about politics, and yet that is a sad reality. Up and down the line, it is hard to get budget answers. Parents look to schools. Schools look to Lansing. Lansing looks to Washington, D.C. D.C. looks over the grand expanse of the nation's needs and must discern at what level they can help. What to do? I say print us some more money, but I could be biased. It's a desperate situation in some ways, all this waiting.

We want to plan, but we need information. The best decisions come from the best information. Without accurate information, we are forced to wait even more or guess. Right now, Pine River is waiting. But, it's hard. If we know we will be opening on time face-to-face, the answers and planning and budget differ from a remote opening. I have not spoken with a single staff member, student, or community member who seem to be interested in opening with social distancing constraints or in continuing with remote learning. I think all of us need a date.

So, for now, let me give you some dates. We will have Open House on August 24 from 4-6 p.m. in the K-3 building; 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. at the middle school and high school. First Day of School is set for August 26. Our Community Tailgate Party is August 28 from 5-7 p.m. in the high school cafeteria. Our first home football game follows; kickoff at 7:00 p.m. Unless directed otherwise—and I acknowledge that could happen—all these dates include in-person, live, and real people opening up Pine River Area Schools. I hope to be right.

We look forward to bringing our students back, to enjoy, together, what school is and what it is *is us*, not a packet of papers in the mail or a class via Zoom. Finally, we look forward to ending this very real, dark chapter in our history. Covid-19 will not define us.

Sincerely,

Matt Lukshaitis, Superintendent

Go Bucks!