

9/4/2020

Highland CUSD Staff and Parents,

We will be wrapping up week 3 in a few hours and I am afraid the update this week is going to be rather lengthy, so I apologize up front. Weeks one and two proved to be very exciting and full of energy with staff, students, and families back on our campuses for the first time since March. The energy is still here, but the challenges have been mounting to continue in-person learning. I want to review some of the challenges and changes in our plan.

Back in July and August we attempted to put together a Return to School Plan that provided information about three types of learning environments. We discussed the remote learning, blended, and the full in-person models. It was concluded that our focus would be on the best environment for our students, providing opportunities for parents to choose between full remote and full in-person learning. That plan was put together with the information we had available at that time. The charts for school exclusion and many of the rules we now abide by didn't exist at that time. What I have observed over the last month or so is many adaptations we have made to our Return to School plan that have not been communicated effectively to parents.

The adaptations are not a result of a district desire to change the plan. For example, the flow chart used to determine when quarantines would be mandated by the Madison County Health Department has changed several times since our RTS plan was approved. Furthermore, the original Return to School plan contained contingencies that took into account whether a student or staff member was wearing a mask. The chart was eventually changed by the Illinois Department of Public Health to ignore whether a mask was worn or not in determining quarantines. Now, a quarantine is mandatory if two individuals are within 6 feet of one another for more than an aggregate of fifteen minutes in a day. This was not the rule in the beginning.

We have seen much disruption to the school environment as a result of our inability to have 6 feet of distance in many of our classrooms. The only way to mitigate this is to consider allowing fewer students to attend school on any given day, thus the blended schedule. We believe this model is less than ideal for students and staff. We believe the amount of instructional time will be nearly 50% due to students attending every other day. On any given day, teachers would teach only half of their students and could not possibly be expected to engage the other half of students who remain home in an effective manner. We also know that it would create many childcare hardships on families of our students and staff. The biggest benefit would be less quarantines when there is a positive COVID case within our schools.

I want to stress that we did not anticipate the changing guidelines at the time we developed the RTS plan. Now we are balancing the level of disruptions due to high numbers of quarantines with the alternative, which presents a whole new host of issues. We have overcome so many challenges to get to this point and now see the social emotional and instructional benefits of having students and teachers together and find it very difficult to change direction. You may be thinking "What are you talking about?" So perhaps we need to focus on specifics.

This was a rough week for Highland High School and Highland Primary. We had 5 positive tests reported at Highland High School this week. We are in discussion with MCHD as to whether and to the extent that transmission may have occurred in the school setting. All positive cases are within the student

population and many factors play into the circumstances with each one. What we know is through contact tracing as many as 160 students may be quarantined as a result. We learned a new term this week “assumed positive”. When a student has a symptom of COVID and has been exposed to a person testing positive, then the individual is “assumed positive” and all contacts of that individual will be ordered to quarantine as well. Regardless of the level of symptoms or illness, the disruption has been significant to the learning environment.

Highland Primary received reports of two positive cases and one assumed positive this week. The two positives were located in the same classroom for at least part of the school day. Another student in this class started seeing symptoms yesterday afternoon causing another presumed positive. Due to the MCHD determining that this may be a “cluster”, we chose to immediately contact families in two classrooms and close ONLY those two classrooms for two weeks. We know this has a major impact on families and our instructional program. We knew this could happen and hoped that our mitigation strategies would prevent such an instance. I need to add that we believe the two positive cases are not connected other than they were located in the same classroom for a portion of the day.

This week’s adventure has brought the district total positive cases to 11 as this letter is written. While the perception will be that the number of positive cases is very high, we are tracking the specific circumstances of each one to determine if further action needs to be taken. On a positive note, the number of staff absences due to COVID remains very low. In fact, our staff have been amazing in their commitment to serve our students and schools.

I am hopeful this letter provides an overview of the week’s events. We continue to work closely with MCHD and modify plans according to guidance provided to us. We will continue to monitor a couple of the situations mentioned earlier and provide information if any changes are necessary. I mentioned in previous correspondence that we hoped to provide a week’s notice if remote learning was imminent. This would still be the goal if it is a district decision to change our learning environment. However, if circumstances such as occurred at Highland Primary necessitate a more decisive decision be made, then it may not be possible. Finally, to be crystal clear, we will plan for in-person learning to continue next week.

Please enjoy the wonderful weather this holiday weekend and take care of yourselves and our children so that we can continue to see them in class next week. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Michael S. Sutton, Superintendent