

9/18/2020

Good afternoon Highland CUSD No. 5 Parents and Staff,

Week 5 is going in the books in a couple of hours! I know many students who selected in-person learning may not have had the luxury of attending the entire 5 weeks due to COVID related absences such as positive tests, presumed positives, isolations, and quarantines. The balance of determining the safest environment with measured risks and providing a quality education program is wearing on everyone. I have had the luxury of talking with parents of students who have not been affected by absences related to COVID as well as those who have been. The story is very similar from a very large majority of them. Our kids need to be in school!

We agree and that is why we have been taking the road much less traveled over the last 5 weeks. A person who has not seen the emotional benefit of students attending school cannot understand the impact it has on every aspect of their lives. It continues to be challenging and will be so for the foreseeable future. This week we had a hand full of positive or presumed positive cases. Let me remind you that these determinations are made by the Madison County Health Department, not Highland School personnel. We follow all guidelines and parameters set by IDPH and MCHD.

Before I get into a weekly recap, please understand that there are a number of students who are quarantined due to family exposure or situations I am not tracking for the purpose of reporting in this newsletter. I will only include situations where a positive or presumed positive is communicated to us that required other students to quarantine. It would be impossible to provide accurate up-to-date information on all situations without writing a small book.

In Week 5 we experienced the following:

- One positive at Highland Primary who was exposed by a family member resulting in seven quarantined students and one teacher
- Two students being tested (siblings), but no confirmed positives and zero quarantined students at Highland Elementary
- Zero students confirmed positive at Alhambra Primary and Grantfork Elementary Schools (few quarantined students due to situations not related to these schools)
- One presumed positive at HMS resulting in four quarantined students
- Two positives and two presumed positives at HHS resulting in approximately 25 quarantined students

While these numbers are very concerning, I am not aware of any significant health concerns as a result. Families are doing a great job at home not allowing exposure to occur with those most at risk of COVID. The number of quarantined students at HHS has drastically decreased this week. I am hopeful that is a sign that we are more aware of the space around us and taking more precautions. One might say it is because so many students are in quarantine, but many students returned to school this week.

One concern going into this school year was our ability to staff classrooms. Obviously, teachers are older than students and are more prone to risk from COVID related factors. This continues to be a real concern. Our staff have access to personal protective equipment (PPE) beyond masks. We have

attempted to take additional steps to protect them. Even with the additional health concerns, our staff continue to report to work, gear up, and educate our children. I can't stress enough how special it is to be a part of a community and a school environment that emphasizes the importance of education as much as ours (tears in the eyes).

We have one more week to see how things are going before the school board meeting on Monday, September 28. I will be providing an update to the Board and making a recommendation whether our current in-person schedule needs to be adjusted. Just to be clear, any consideration of a hybrid schedule would likely only pertain to Highland High School. This is important to understand since childcare issues would likely not result. That said, we have been committed to providing a full in-person learning environment because we know it is what's best for our students. A decision to change schedules would be the last resort and only when the number of cases and quarantines become unmanageable.

Many districts in the region are starting back to school in the next few weeks. Remote learning continues to be a challenge for all districts including Highland CUSD No. 5. We have approximately 400 or so remote learning students. Many of them are not engaging during the expected times and this presents a major problem. Students who are in remote learning are expected to engage at the times established by their instructors. When this does not occur, many absences and missed work result.

Please remember that students are accountable to complete the necessary work at the appropriate times or the grade will be impacted. I am afraid that many parents and students in remote learning are going to be surprised if the assigned grades are less than expected. If you are the parent of a remote learner, please make sure that you know what your child(ren) is/are supposed to be doing.

Week 6 will be critical in determining how second quarter will look. Please continue to reinforce our mitigation strategies with your children. They are wear a face covering, socially distance to the extent possible, wash hands often, and stay home when sick. Together we can continue to do this. Thank you for your continued patience and have a great weekend!

Sincerely,

Michael S. Sutton, Superintendent