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RE: Rise in COVID-19 Cases in the Community and Implications for Schools

Dear Families and Staff:

As Clinton County school districts prepared our Return to Learn plans for the 2020-2021 school year, our most important consideration was delivering quality education while supporting the health, safety, and well-being of our students, staff, and their families. As part of our plans, we offered multiple instructional options to best meet everyone's needs. Options included in-person and remote instruction, and in some instances, a combination of both. While we understand the need for flexibility, our ultimate goal is for all students to return to in-person instruction so that schools can continue to provide all the services that Clinton County children need to be successful.

Right from the beginning, our districts implemented protocols based on the best information we could gather. Relying on expert guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, and the Mid-Michigan District Health Department, along with specific direction from the Michigan Department of Education, we developed plans that included protocols to keep our students and staff safe. This included protocols that (1) worked to keep COVID-19 from entering our buildings; and (2) mitigated the possible spread of COVID-19. These strategies included:

1. Keeping COVID-19 Out of Our Schools
 - a. Required daily screening for staff
 - b. Recommended daily screening for students
 - c. Limited access to volunteers and contractors
 - d. Suspension of field trips and other activities
2. Mitigating the Spread
 - a. Wearing of face coverings
 - b. Social distancing
 - c. Cohorting
 - d. Limits to crowd sizes at events
 - e. Expanded disinfecting and cleaning work spaces and commons areas

Now, nearly two full months into the school year, we are appreciative of the collective effort that has allowed us to continue to offer education options to our families. We also want to thank our families for their vigilance in monitoring the symptoms of their children, communicating exposure and test results, and prompt responses to quarantine requests. This attentiveness from families has aided greatly in our ability to work collaboratively with the Health Department to act quickly to isolate and quarantine those who are positive for COVID-19 or have been

exposed to the virus. Through our experience this fall, it has become abundantly clear that the better we do with our mitigation strategies, the more we will be able to keep schools open and/or have children attend school in person.

Our efforts have worked to create a safer environment for students and staff members in the school setting, but the same protocols have not been uniformly practiced within our community at large. The Health Department and other state public health officials have reported a significant increase in positive cases across our state and region in recent weeks. However, we know that despite increased community transmission levels, there has still been very limited transmission within schools. In fact, the majority of individuals associated with our schools that are currently in isolation or quarantine did not have an exposure to COVID-19 at school. Rather, these exposures happened outside of the school setting.

Schools play a vital role in our communities, and we've seen that having the in-person option this school year has provided a significant benefit for the academic, social, emotional, and physical wellbeing of our students and families. Having schools open and operational also allows for parents and caregivers to keep attending work, thus, sustaining our local economy. We stand united with our local health department sharing a common goal to have the optimal learning environment of in-person instruction. At the same time, community-based spread of COVID-19 has the potential to jeopardize our continued ability to offer in-person learning and extracurricular activities.

The ability to keep our schools open for in-person instruction is dependent not only on our ability to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within the walls of our building, but it is equally dependent upon how our entire community is faring as a whole. If the rate of cases continues to trend upward, the Health Department warns that schools may be forced to implement additional protocols and restrictions to prevent the current rate of spread. These safety measures could mean the cancellation of extracurricular activities, including band and athletics, further limiting access to events and, in a worst-case scenario, forcing a shift to fully remote learning across all our districts.

It is critical that we all work together to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in our communities with the same resolve that has allowed us to successfully open our schools this fall. We all must follow the necessary protocols when out in public or around others outside of your household that have worked to provide a safe environment in our schools: wear a mask, watch your distance, and wash your hands. Continue to screen your students for the onset of symptoms before the start of each day, and keep them home if they are sick.

Our ongoing partnership with you, our school families and community members, is of the utmost importance to us as we uphold health and safety precautions both within and outside of school. Thank you for your continuous support, flexibility, and demonstrated resilience during this unprecedented school year.

Respectfully,

Your Partners in Education

Marcus Cheatham, Health Officer, Mid-Michigan District Health Department

Wayne Petroelje, Superintendent, Clinton County RESA

Paul Hartsig, Superintendent, Bath Community Schools

Neil Hufnagel, Superintendent, Fowler Public Schools

John Deiter, Superintendent, DeWitt Public Schools

Ryan Cunningham, Superintendent, Ovid-Elsie Area Schools

Jeff Wright, Superintendent, Pewamo-Westphalia Community Schools

Mark Palmer, Superintendent, St. Johns Public Schools