July 28, 2021

Highland CUSD No. 5 Staff and Parents,

As you are aware, the CDC (Center for Disease Control) and IDPH (Illinois Department of Public Health) released amended COVID-19 school guidance yesterday, Tuesday, July 27, 2021. I have met and collaborated with many constituent groups including the Madison County Health Department, many Illinois superintendents, various legal counsel, district nurses, employee associations, administrators and the Board of Education based on the previous guidance sent on Friday, July 9. The major changes in the amended guidance was adding recommendations for vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals wear masks indoors specifically recommending universal masking in schools. With the start of school quickly approaching, our number one priority is to provide in-person learning in a safe environment and provide a clear description of what that looks like for the start of the school year.

The District plans to take a layered mitigation approach. Layered mitigation strategies will allow the District some flexibility. Strategies emphasized last year that will continue include social distancing to the extent possible, hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, monitoring early symptoms, encouraging students and staff to stay home when sick, and additional cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces.

The CDC and IDPH guidance is clear that all mitigation strategies are recommended and important in keeping our students and staff safe. If a mitigation strategy is removed, like masking, it is strongly recommended that other mitigation strategies must be in place. **The Return to School Plan will be fluid and adjusted based on local statistics.** If it appears the absence of voluntary masks create an overwhelming number of COVID cases, we will adjust the expectations to ensure all students and staff can come to school daily and feel safe. In much the same way, if it appears other mitigations are not working, we will make adjustments. However, it is important to realize that all decisions must also be based on local COVID transmission rates and could change as the school year progresses depending on the transmissions occurring within our community and schools.

It is important that we provide our students a safe educational experience that allows them the opportunity to be free from political influence and allow them to learn, grow, and socialize in a normal environment. We will attempt to accommodate students and staff who have elevated risks associated with COVID and support them during this continued challenging time. Similar to last year, our focus remains on providing in-person learning in a safe environment.

The CDC and IDPH continue to promote vaccination as the leading health prevention strategy to end the COVID-19 pandemic. Highland CUSD No. 5 does not require eligible students and staff to be vaccinated against COVID-19. According to CDC and IDPH guidelines, vaccinated students and staff will not be required to be quarantined from school even when they are identified as a close contact to a positive COVID-19 individual. This means that vaccinated students can continue to attend school and participate in extracurricular activities even if they are a close contact to a COVID positive person. Though the vaccination is not required by Highland CUSD No. 5, we are working with the Madison County Health Department to offer a vaccination clinic at the main office, 400 Broadway, on **Wednesday, September 1 from 3:30-7:30 p.m.** for anyone 12 years and older. Eligible students must be accompanied by a parent or legal guardian. Both first and second Pfizer Vaccine doses will be available. A second clinic will be scheduled three weeks after the September 1st clinic at 400 Broadway. More information regarding this clinic will be provided in coming weeks.

Highland CUSD No. 5 plans to offer 5 days of in person learning to all students aligned to pre-COVID daily schedules. However, from August 18th to August 27th, Highland High School and Highland Middle School will dismiss bus riders 10 minutes early at the end of the day. The purpose is to ensure during the first 8 days that our buses are able to return to the primary and elementary parking lots for dismissal. It is crucial that the staff at those schools develop a dismissal procedure with buses in position. We hope that those 8 days provide an opportunity to fine tune our procedures. Also, doors at all primary and elementary schools will not open until 8:15 a.m. (same as last year)

**Social Distancing**

A social distance of 3 feet is recommended by IDPH/CDC. While staff and students will be encouraged to attempt social distancing as much as possible while in doors, best educational practice often requires students to work together in small groups in close proximity. Since 3 feet distancing is not possible in most classrooms, students may be seated in small family pods to reduce the number of close contacts within a classroom. Students who choose to wear a mask during these times will be fully supported. Parents and/or students concerned about these situations need to communicate directly to the building administrator to identify a remedy if possible.

**Wearing masks**

Wearing masks remains one of the mitigation strategies recommended by IDPH/CDC. Wearing masks is not required, but highly recommended for vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals at this time. Highland CUSD No. 5 will take the same approach. We believe the decision to mask or not most appropriately lies with each family. To support families in their decision whether to mask, Highland CUSD No. 5 is committed to ensure those decisions are respected and that any negative comments or bullying due to the decision to wear a mask or not are dealt with in a timely and serious manner. Every individual/family should be respected in their decision. Bullying will not be tolerated.

**One area that masks will be required per the IDPH/CDC guidance is on public transportation, thus school buses. Each student and driver will be required to properly wear a mask (face shield if approved due to safety reasons) while on the school bus. Students who refuse to comply with the mask requirement will be warned and eventually excluded from riding the school bus if compliance is not provided.**

**Staying home when sick/COVID testing for symptomatic individuals**

As was the case in the 2020-21 school year, the District will continue to ask parents to keep students home that are exhibiting COVID symptoms. Keeping students and adults that are sick out of schools remains the number one way to prevent the spread of COVID as well as other illnesses. The District will provide updated details on the COVID symptoms periodically in weekly messages.

**Handwashing and respiratory etiquette**

Frequent hand washing and hand sanitizing will help prevent the spread of COVID-19. The district has provided most classrooms and entryways with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains 80% alcohol that can be used. Handwashing and respiratory etiquette (covering coughs/sneezes) will be encouraged and emphasized throughout the school year.

**Contact Tracing/Quarantine from School**

Keeping students in school is a primary focus. However, there could be times where students who are not able to maintain social distance would have to be quarantined from school for a period of time (likely 7 to 14 days) if it is determined that they were in close contact with a COVID positive individual. The District is waiting on final guidance from IDPH regarding the length of time students will have to quarantine from school. Students who participate in other mitigation strategies (masking) may not have to quarantine even if they are a close contact to a COVID positive individual. Rules may require that contact tracing include a 6 feet distance rather than the 3 feet of social distance recommended by IDPH/CDC. Our staff will follow the guidance provided.

CDC and IDPH have confirmed that vaccinated individuals will not have to be quarantined from school even if they are a close contact. If an individual is vaccinated, documentation will need to be provided in order to not be identified in the contact tracing. Any individual who has not provided documentation will be identified as unvaccinated until documentation is provided. We will not ask for documentation except in this case. Parents/Students may provide documentation to the school nurse in advance to be proactive, but it is not required. For individuals who are not vaccinated, wearing a mask may allow them to remain in-person in some situations. We will continue to update our procedures as guidance is provided.

With the absence of masks in many situations, it is expected that more seasonal viruses will occur this year. This could complicate the ability of school staff to exclude and/or consider situations when students exhibit symptoms. We need cooperation by all of our school stakeholders to maintain good communication in these events.

**Proper Cleaning and Disinfection**

Classrooms will be cleaned and sanitized throughout the day and disinfected with an approved EPA disinfectant when appropriate. Staff and students will also have the ability to sanitize their work spaces with appropriate cleaning agents that will be available in all classrooms.

Highland CUSD No. 5, in consultation with the Madison County Health Department will make decisions about when to add or remove any of the prevention strategies for the students and staff based on local conditions, transmission rates of the virus within our school and local community.

We are very excited about the start of the 2021-22 school year. Although the uncertainties of COVID are not yet behind us, we know we are better equipped to keep our students in-person for full days of school as the 2021-22 school year begins. We need everyone’s help, support and patience to keep our students safe and focused on learning.