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Dear PCS Families:

I hope you have enjoyed your holiday celebrations and had a restful break thus far. I also hope you have avoided COVID infection or exposure, since case positivity numbers are the highest we have experienced throughout the pandemic. I have done my best to return as many emails as possible during the week and especially over the last few days, but haven't been able to reply to everyone. I understand there are many questions, concerns, and requests for me to consider a number of suggested plans for our scheduled return to in person learning on Monday. Despite this being a vacation week, it has been busy, and our cases in town are similarly high to our neighbors around the entire state. Positivity rates have been close to 18 percent as the highly contagious Omicron variant makes its way around the country, state and Plainville.

My COVID leadership and response team has been actively monitoring cases and doing their best to provide necessary guidance over the break. I had shared that we would not be as immediate with contact tracing over the break, but it has continued, as my small but hard-working and knowledgeable team does its best to manage the challenges this week has brought. With all of that background shared, here are some updates on topics I have received repeated questions about this week, along with some other information you may find helpful.

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**Recent CDC Shift in Quarantine Guidance:** The CDC recently reduced the number of days required to quarantine after exposure. At this time, *this shift does not apply to educational settings or early childcare facilities*. However, the State Department of Health and State Department of Education are currently reviewing educational quarantine guidelines and will be sending updated guidance to districts. Until that time, all districts in the state of Connecticut are continuing to follow current practices related to quarantine periods.

**At Home Testing Kits:** The district is anticipating an allotment of at home testing kits. A significant amount of these were supposed to have come in prior to today, and they were set to be distributed today at PHS. I want to thank our town leadership and first responder partners for their efforts to coordinate this home testing kit distribution opportunity. Unfortunately, we received word late last night, close to midnight, that those supplies have not yet come in from the federal and state sources. At this time, we await further information about when those kits will be received, and will then share information about distribution. I can confirm that the district does not plan to conduct in-school testing, and would distribute any test kits received to families based on allotment or need.

**Increased Mitigation Measures and Requirements:** I communicated with my administrators and principals prior to break, and during this week, that we will need to take additional measures

to reduce and manage potential for spread in schools. We will be enforcing mask mandates in all indoor settings when students are not eating or playing an instrument. In settings where masks are not possible, including the cafeteria during eating time only, and during band practice, more space is being ensured to reduce risk and contact tracing needs. If students remain 6 or more feet apart in those settings and only remove masks for the time needed to eat or play their instrument, we will reduce risks for students in these settings. Mask wearing will continue on buses, in all indoor classroom and hallway settings, in transition outside and when congregating in close proximity to others outdoors. We will continue to ensure regular cleaning and disinfection of shared surfaces and will provide access to regular handwashing and antibacterial solutions, despite this remaining a lower area of concern for transmission.

I will be meeting with our athletic director to consider if any additional limits need to be placed on spectators at games. Currently, the DPH and CIAC have reinstituted mask mandates for athletes in most sports, at most times. I will work with our leadership team to share any additional changes in mitigation measures, but the goal is to increase what we can, and keep as many children and adults as healthy and free of possible infection as possible.

**Guidance on Closing Schools:** Neither the governor, nor the State Department of Education, has provided any indication of intent to close schools. To the contrary, the opposite goal has been emphasized by state officials, keeping kids in school. Superintendents and Boards of Education do not have the authority to choose fully remote or hybrid options for our schools. In full transparency, I do not believe that moving to a remote model would be in the best interest of our students, families and staff. Regardless, I do not have the authority to make any change in our school model. When needed, we will continue to quarantine close contacts and potentially full classes when determined sensible due to the number of cases present in a given classroom. This has been our ongoing practice since the implementation of Screen and Stay, and that will remain in effect. We will also have to monitor staffing shortages, as that may be the only situation necessitating a shutdown that would be treated similar to a snow day, and would need to be made up in June. We truly hope to avoid that from happening.

**Case Management:** The district portal has experienced a high volume of reported cases this week. We have also received direct reports from a significant number of staff members who have been directly impacted by COVID. Thank you to those who reported cases using the portal. Our team has been working on cases as much as possible. The hope was to give our contact tracing team a bit of a break this week, but that has not been possible to the extent we hoped. I implore you to continue to be patient with our school staff who are working through these challenges with your families, and most specifically, with our school nurses upon our return on Monday. They are under a tremendous amount of pressure to work with families in processing cases, monitor ill children in the buildings, and tend to the daily medical needs of our students. I can assure you that our team will continue to do their best given the current circumstances.

**Vaccine Clinic:** The Southington/Plainville/Middlefield Health District is planning on holding a child vaccine clinic at the Calendar House on Saturday, January 15th. The clinic will run from 10-3. More details, including a link for those interested in scheduling an appointment, will be sent out to families soon. To clarify, this is a clinic intended for unvaccinated school age children and not a booster clinic.

Thank you for your continued patience and understanding. I will remain optimistic and hope for a healthier, happier and more normal year ahead. It is critical that we continue to work together to navigate this latest set of challenges. I wish everyone a healthy, peaceful and happy year of 2022.

Steve LePage, Superintendent of Schools