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Superintendent of Schools

August 13, 2021

Dear Needham Public Schools Families:

I hope you and your family are enjoying a restful and safe summer.

Allow me to take this opportunity to update you about health and safety measures we expect to implement this fall when schools reopen on September 1st.

Context & Background

On June 15, 2021, the Needham School Committee reviewed and supported the district's [Fall 2021 School Reopening Plan](#) which details how we will respond to the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of our students in the 2021-22 school year, particularly those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Our fall plan maintains the district's commitment to and focus on the health, safety, and wellbeing of all students and staff.

As we approach the beginning of the school year we know that most Needham teachers and staff are vaccinated, and most students in grades 7-12, per public health data, are also vaccinated. In fact, over 96% of eligible Needham residents (ages 12 and up) have received [at least one dose of the vaccine](#). This is good news, and provides protections for our students and staff. However, the complexities of operating schools during a global pandemic remain.

On July 30th the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) issued [new guidance](#) to districts for a safe reopening of schools in the fall. This was precipitated by the increase statewide and locally of COVID-19, specifically the so-called Delta variant which has led to the increase in cases, including in those individuals who have been fully vaccinated. These "breakthrough" cases have been a tiny fraction of the total number of those vaccinated; but coupled with the strength of the Delta variant and the reality that young children in grades PreK through 6 are not yet eligible for the vaccine, it now makes sense to consider

carefully how we will continue to emphasize safety measures as a prerequisite to a successful and healthy school opening this fall and throughout the year.

Joint Committee on Health & Safety

The ability of the Needham Public Schools to keep schools open last year was due, in large part, to the efforts and guidance of the district's [Joint Committee on Health and Safety](#). The Joint Committee analyzes public health information at the local level, with consideration of the fact that Needham's school community includes students who live in Boston, as well as staff who live in a variety of locations. The Joint Committee considers the guidance provided by the DESE, [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#), and the [American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\)](#), along with [local infection and vaccination](#) rates. Therefore, it is wise and prudent for the Committee to continue its role in reviewing, discussing, and advising the district and superintendent on all health protocols, measures, and decisions related to COVID-19.

The Joint Committee on Health and Safety has met twice this month to review recent [DESE guidance](#), discuss local and state health metrics, and consider what health and safety measures are critical as we begin a new school year.

Recommendations for a Healthy and Safe Fall School Opening

At this time, the Joint Committee is recommending the following for the 2021-22 school year:

- Emphasize a layered approach to health mitigation measures in all schools and classrooms. Continue to rely on ventilation, hygiene measures (e.g., frequent handwashing, disinfectant), the [health attestation](#) form, and the availability of plexiglass dividers for those teachers who prefer using them in their classrooms.
- All students and staff, Preschool through Grade 12, will wear appropriate face coverings on buses, in all school buildings and classrooms:
 - **PreK - 6 Students and Staff** will wear face coverings until such time as the Joint Committee recommends and circumstances allow for face coverings to become optional (e.g., the availability of vaccines for children under age 12).

Students/staff do not need to wear masks while eating, drinking, during mask breaks, or learning outside.

- **Grades 7 - 12 Students and Staff** will wear face coverings until such time as the Joint Committee recommends and circumstances allow for face coverings to be optional. Students/staff do not need to wear masks while eating, drinking, during mask breaks, or learning outside.
- During the first two weeks of October, the Joint Committee on Health and Safety will re-evaluate the need for and efficacy of grades 7-12 vaccinated students and staff to continue to wear face coverings in school during the school day. The Joint Committee will consider the health and safety situation both statewide and locally to determine if face coverings can be optional for vaccinated individuals. The Committee will develop benchmarks or metrics to guide its recommendation to the superintendent for face coverings to become optional for vaccinated individuals.
- The superintendent will recommend to the Needham School Committee on August 26, 2021 a revision of the [existing Face Coverings policy](#) which will be consistent with the above recommendations. (This meeting will be held in person at 5:00 p.m. at the Broadmeadow School, broadcast live on local cable, and also be accessible via zoom; detailed agenda and information to be posted on the district website.)

Finally, the Joint Committee on Health and Safety will continue to discuss and assess the need and effectiveness of a possible student and staff surveillance testing program.

I am scheduling a Family Open House via Zoom for Monday, August 23, 2021 at 5:30 p.m. to review this information, share updates, and respond to family questions. Members of the Joint Committee on Health and Safety will participate, including Town of Needham Public Health & Human Services Director, Tim McDonald. I will email a link to the meeting in the next several days. The meeting will also be recorded and forwarded to those who are unable to attend.

As a community, we will continue to manage the changing landscape of the virus as well as understand new and more reliable scientific information in order to make the best decisions for our schools. We need to continue to be thoughtful and flexible as the data changes in order to lower the risk of infection in schools and keep our schools safe *and open*. We will continue

to understand that local circumstances or public health orders may require a change of our plans at any time.

Despite the resurgence of COVID cases, we will begin this school year stronger and better positioned to be responsive to health needs and our students' learning. We are excited to return to a school year of full time and in person learning! If you have not already done so, please check out the district's [2021 Fall School Reopening Plan](#) which details how we will provide for our students' learning needs in the year ahead. (The plan will be updated later to reflect our revised health protocols.) Principals will also forward updated and school specific information about health and safety as we get closer to September 1st.

Please enjoy these last few weeks of summer and sun!

Respectfully,

Daniel E. Gutekanst

Superintendent of Schools
Needham Public Schools
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