



Superintendent's Newsletter

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Superintendent

November 2020

Thanks

This year has been a challenge like no other. I know that most everyone is at wit's end and wants to get back to the old normal. My seemingly regular form letters about COVID cases, struggles with the various instructional models, figuring out how to make sense of all of the constant changes, and the unknown about what today, tomorrow, and next month may look like is asking a great deal of everyone in the GPS community. Despite all that we are dealing with, I am incredibly thankful for the tremendous work of the GPS staff, the resilience of our students, and the patience and partnership from our parents. Like you, I am taking it one day at a time, consistently trying to do what is best for our students and staff. I have no idea what the coming months will look like, but we continue to be committed to open communication about whatever challenges come our way. If you have questions about anything, please don't hesitate to reach out to the principals regarding building-specific issues and to me for district-wide issues.

Updated Guidance

Last week, Governor Baker released updated state COVID guidance. In relation to education, there was an increased push for mask usage for our youngest students. We already require mask use for all students, so there was no change for us in Grafton. The governor also put out a call to all districts to maximize in-person learning. I believe this message was directed at the numerous districts that are all-remote while having relatively low community transmission rates. Currently, half of the 950,000 students in Massachusetts are fully remote.

In Grafton, we have a relatively high rate of in-person participation and synchronous instruction. The state said that districts should utilize a hybrid model if there is no other way to meet health and safety requirements. The existing requirements include a three-foot minimum distance requirement between all individuals with an ideal of six feet. As long as the distancing requirement is in place, districts cannot bring all students back at once. No district that I know of has the space needed to do so.

The governor also announced a change in the metric being used to measure transmission rates. This change in metrics was paired with a shift in the approach that districts are to take if they are labeled as 'red'. Previously, a district labeled as 'red' would be advised to switch to a remote model. The updated guidance calls for 'red' districts to move to, or stay with, a hybrid model (what we are currently doing). If a district or individual school experiences a case of suspected in-school transmission or a "significant" municipal outbreak they are allowed to go full-remote. This decision would be made in consultation with the department of Public Health, Grafton Board of Health, and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. If the decision is made, at any point, to go to full remote, the school or district needs to return to in-person as quickly as possible.

The following link will take you to a memo from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education on this topic with links that include greater detail: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/interpreting-dph-metrics.html>

What Does the New Guidance Mean for Grafton?

The new state guidance will not result in any changes in Grafton. We are currently providing as much in-person instruction as possible given the spacing requirements that are in place. We continue to work on preparing for the possibility of having to temporarily switch to all remote at the individual school level and at the district level. So far, it has been predominantly individual schools that have needed to temporarily switch to all-remote across the state. We fully expect to maintain use of our Remote Learning Academy throughout the school year.

At the last School Committee meeting I presented a district update. I spoke to the new state guidance, planning, and COVID updates. The video from the meeting can be found here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KQY8zT3nA5qSgpYT2RPqaHSch_XPs-vo/view?usp=sharing

Staffing Challenges

Right now, our biggest challenge has been in the area of staffing levels. Any time there is a positive COVID case, we work with the Department of Public Health to do contact tracing. This formal process identifies any individuals who meet the close contact criteria in relation to the person with the positive case. If a student or staff member tests positive for COVID-19, their close contacts are defined as only those who have been within 6 feet of distance of the individual for at least fifteen minutes, while the person was infectious. The infectious period begins 2 days prior to symptom onset. If someone is asymptomatic, the infectious period is considered to begin 2 days prior to the collection of their positive test.

Our most significant challenge is when we have staff who are quarantined as we typically have fewer than six substitutes in the district on a daily basis. Typical absences due to 'regular' illness, bereavement, etc. are now paired with those being quarantined for 14 days. This number is unprecedented and is paired with the reality that we have the lowest number of substitutes that we have ever had. Certainly, this is not a good combination! As we move into the winter months, the concern is that our 'regular' illness rates will rise and make the problem even more significant. We are working to minimize the potential for all close contact exposure, but I expect the reality of this challenge to persist all year.

Continued Suspension of Fees

This past Tuesday evening, the School Committee voted to continue the suspension of transportation, parking, and athletic fees for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year.

Sincerely,
-Jay