



WESTWOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Honoring Tradition, Inspiring Excellence, Shaping the Future

EMILY J. PARKS
Superintendent of Schools

February 10, 2021

Dear WPS Families:

I am writing to provide an update of our plans for the spring and our preparation for the expansion of in-person learning, including two important things that you can do to assist us in this process.

Our Current Status

As you know, COVID-19 has not spared Westwood. Since the December break, Westwood has experienced a significant increase in COVID-19 cases, and has been designated red or upper yellow by the state's rating system for the last several weeks. Since the beginning of January, in the Westwood Public Schools, we have typically had between 20 and 26 COVID-19 cases at any given moment and between 25 and 100 students in quarantine either because they have symptoms or are a close contact (typically due to community-based activities).

With that said, we have come a long way from our reopening planning in the summer when we frankly didn't know if we were going to be able to safely sustain in-person instruction. With 5 months behind us, and with everyone's good faith efforts to implement our health and safety protocols in school, we're still open for business.

As you know, in our reopening plan, we prioritized live, synchronous instruction for students on their at-home days. Our fully remote option is taught by our own WPS teachers. Our model prioritized more in-person learning for our youngest learners for whom accessing instruction via technology was very difficult. As a result, we have seen success on a number of fronts:

- Unlike many districts, our hybrid model did not require revision when the state set new synchronous learning requirements last month.
- From the first day of school, our preschool, kindergarten and grade 1 students have attended school 4 days per week.
- In November, we were able to expand in-person learning to 4 days for grades 2 and 3.
- Our 4th graders will return for in-person learning 4 days per week on February 22nd.

We have been able to take these steps within the parameter of 6-feet of physical distance that the district committed to and that is currently recommended by the CDC. We do not believe that we are able to expand beyond grade 4 while maintaining the 6 ft parameter given the available space in our buildings.

Planning for Spring and Expanded In-Person Learning

At this point, with 5 months of data, we can see that our safety measures are working and that instances of transmission potentially attributable to contact in school have been very rare, even as the incidence of COVID-19 in Westwood has been high. The combination of mitigation measures -- consistent mask wearing, frequent hand washing, maintaining physical distance, upgraded HVAC filters, cleaning and disinfecting protocols, buses with open windows and fewer riders -- have kept the community safe in school.

As we look toward the spring, several other important mitigation measures are on the horizon, presenting an opportunity to plan for the expansion of in-person instruction. These include:

- Weekly COVID-19 pool testing for staff (already in place)

- Weekly COVID-19 pool testing for students (voluntary, with parent consent, beginning the week of March 8th)
- Vaccination for educators
- Improved weather, allowing once again for open classroom windows and more time outdoors (particular during snack and/or lunch when masks can't be worn)
- Hopefully, a subsiding number of COVID-19 cases in Westwood, moving us back into the state's "green" designation.

With these factors on the horizon, the District and the Westwood Teachers Association have reopened collective bargaining with an eye toward returning students to in-person learning. **We all agree that a return to full in-person learning is the ultimate objective. We are striving to return to in-person learning in April, if the conditions exist to do so safely, including improved public health metrics.**

For our fully remote families: I will ensure that the fully remote option continues for the remainder of the school year.

Each new layer of mitigation is another tool to lower the risk. While there is still disagreement in the medical and public health community about what distance constitutes "appropriate physical distancing," we anticipate that both the CDC and the Commonwealth will be issuing updated guidance to schools on this issue soon, based on their assessment of the latest scientific research. We want to be ready to respond quickly to evolving guidance.

I will provide an update on our planning process to parents on March 12th.

How Can Parents Help Us in This Planning Process

You can do two important things to help us as we chart the path forward. First, by the end of this week, you will receive a link to a survey to provide us with important input. I ask that you please use the survey link to provide input rather than sending an email. The survey will be an efficient way for us to collect and consider this information.

Second, we are preparing to launch weekly COVID-19 pool testing for students the week of March 8th. By the end of this week, you will also receive information about pool testing and an invitation to an informational webinar. Though testing is not required to attend school, we hope you will consider consenting to your child's participation in this testing program. While testing is not a panacea, public health officials are clear that it is an important mitigation factor as we prepare to bring students back to in-person learning. Weekly testing will allow us to quickly identify asymptomatic individuals so that they can quarantine. It will also provide important data about the overall safety of the community.

The pandemic and its impacts have continued long past what any of us had expected, and I think it's safe to say that we all look forward to being able to resume in-school learning in what will be the "new normal." We need to all continue to do our part as a community to keep each other safe and facilitate a full return to school. I will continue to keep you apprised over the coming week.

Sincerely,



Emily J. Parks
Superintendent