

# School Year 2021-2022 Update

August 12, 2021 Board Meeting

Dr. Michael J. Martirano, Superintendent



- Good afternoon again, Board members. We are quickly approaching the first day of school and making all of the preparations needed to warmly welcome back all students and staff. I personally am eagerly counting off the days until school doors open on August 30, and I know that my excitement is shared by students, teachers, administrators, staff and parents all over our county.
- I know that many stakeholders, including Board of Education members, have questions and concerns regarding the upcoming school year. In today's report I will provide insights and details on several primary areas that I have received the preponderance of questions. They are
  - Additional insights on masking,
  - Cafeteria protocols,
  - Quarantining procedures,
  - Transportation, and
  - Other mitigation factors including handwashing, ventilation, and other strategies.
- Additionally, I will provide updates on school meals for the upcoming school year.
- I understand there may be questions on additional topics and staff will be available to answer those today following my remarks.
- Before I start, I want to state very clearly that Howard County public schools will be open, in person, five days per week beginning on the first day of school. Essentially, we are back to a normal instructional program, with the addition of masks regardless of vaccination status and the additional precautions of increased ventilation, continued hand-washing and use of hand sanitizer, and use of plexi-glass where appropriate. This means:
  - Classes will look normal except students and staff will be wearing masks.

- Buses will be back to capacity with windows and roof hatches open for ventilation when possible and students and drivers will be wearing masks.
- Bathrooms will be back to full capacity and students will be wearing masks.
- Sports will be played as normal. Indoor sports will require masks at all times, other than for student-athletes who are actively participating in practice and competitions. Student-athletes who wish to may also wear a mask outdoors.
- If I haven't made my point strongly enough, let me state once again, **masks are required for students, staff and visitors**, regardless of vaccination status.

### **Student Vaccinations & Testing**

- I would like to provide one urgent message to parents and guardians of students as we near the first day of school.
- We need to stay very aware of the risk that the virus could spread in a school, requiring students and staff to be out of the building for an extended period of time. This is particularly the case given the spread of the delta variant.
- Earlier this week, I joined County Executive Dr. Calvin Ball, Howard County Health Officer Dr. Maura Rossman, and other members of the local health community at a press conference urging the continued vaccination of Howard County residents - especially students who are eligible to receive the vaccine and will be attending school on August 30th.
- We will continue to support the Health Department's work to make vaccines available to all eligible students, and we are hopeful that vaccines will soon be authorized for students under age 12. We will also continue to partner with the Health Department in providing in-school COVID testing and supporting contact tracing.
- Additionally, the health professionals in our schools will continue to provide diagnostic testing to students and staff who display COVID-19 symptoms during the school day. These tests consist of rapid antigen testing with results in under 15 minutes and a confirmatory PCR test for those that test negative on the rapid test.
- Last week I had a wonderful conversation with our newly-elected Student Member of the Board, Peter Banyas, where he asked about my ultimate goal for this school year. It was a focusing question and my answer was simple and concise - to keep students in

school so we can provide the highest levels of instruction and support, while keeping students and staff healthy and safe.

- We must all do everything in our power to keep schools open to students for the entire school year. These measures include universal masking and vaccinations.

### **Staff Vaccine Announcement**

- A question I am hearing from stakeholders is related to vaccination rates among school system staff.
- I would like to lift up information I provided to the Board during the March 25, 2021, COVID-19 work session, which summarized our staff vaccination efforts. Though staff were not required to disclose their vaccination status, we know that 5,750 vaccine doses were disseminated to staff through our partners for all staff who wished to receive them. Other staff members self-reported that they received vaccines through other providers, which is why at that point in time we were able to confidently say that most of our staff who expressed an interest in getting vaccinated received a vaccine.
- As I've stated before, we rely heavily on the expertise of health officials from the Howard County Health Department and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. I share their growing concern, and I know this Board and our community do as well, about the spread of the delta variant, which poses an even greater risk of infection for our children under the age of 12 who are too young to be vaccinated.
- Just this week, the Howard County Health Department issued a Health Advisory announcing the COVID-19 community transmission in Howard County has reached the "Substantial" level based on the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The most recent data from the Howard County Health Department's website states that the 7 day average of confirmed cases per 100,000 is 8.95 with a 2.28% testing positivity rate.
- We know that vaccination against COVID-19 is an effective way to prevent serious infection, transmission and outbreaks, including hospitalization and unvaccinated individuals are more likely to get seriously infected and spread the virus. While Howard County's overall vaccination rate relative to neighboring counties is high and our rate of fully vaccinated residents between the ages of 12 and 17 is approximately 71.3%, our students under the age of 12, primarily in pre-K through sixth grade are not vaccinated.

- In light of these growing concerns and to provide families and staff a higher level of assurance as they prepare for the start of the school year, I have an important announcement to make that I shared with the Board earlier this afternoon.
- For the 2021-2022 school year, as we return to normalized instruction and look to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 with every tool available to us, the **Howard County Public School System will require all employees to provide proof of full vaccination or undergo regular COVID-19 testing.**
- I did not make this decision lightly. I have consulted with our General Counsel, Deputy Superintendent, and Division Chiefs on the operational impact of this decision and we have already been in touch with Dr. Maura Rossman and leaders of our bargaining units, who are supportive of this decision. In addition, I will note that the United States Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona and Director of the National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Dr. Anthony Fauci have both weighed in this week regarding the importance of vaccinating school staff.
- While we do not have additional details to share with you at this time, please know that the implementation of this requirement will be complicated and require collaboration and partnership with the Howard County Health Department and the Maryland Department of Health as well as our employee bargaining units, administrators and system leaders. In developing these procedures we will also look to best practices and consult with other school district leaders.
- We will share implementation procedures and further guidance over the coming days. This guidance will include information for contractors, visitors and others who interact with our students and staff.
- We know that vaccines and masking are our best tools in confronting this pandemic. As a community, it is our responsibility to keep our students safe, and I feel strongly that these precautions are another way to keep our schools open and our most vulnerable students safe.
- Board members, as you know, I have not wavered in my conviction that fully in-person instruction is absolutely best for our students academically and for their social and emotional well-being. Our plans are consistent with MSDE's direction that in-person instruction be provided every day throughout the 2021-2022 school year, and with our firm intention to maintain an in-person instructional model unless schools are directed to close by the state or Howard County Health Department.

- I want to make use of every tool available that will assist in mitigation to allow us to keep schools open. I don't want to leave anything to chance in keeping children safe.

## Masking

- Last week we announced, and I want to re-emphasize, that universal masking is required in all Howard County Public School System schools and offices, regardless of vaccination status. This decision was made following the strong endorsement of universal masking by the Howard County Health Department, who referenced the guidance provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Maryland Department of Health, and American Academy of Pediatrics.
- It is recommended that all staff and students wear a mask with multiple layers.
- We rely heavily on the expertise of the Health Department when making decisions that impact the health of our students and staff. We will continue to follow their guidance as we monitor the local health landscape and consider changes to the current masking protocols in schools and offices.
- Masking is also required on school buses for everyone, regardless of age or vaccination status, in accordance with state and federal mandates. Masks are not required outdoors, but are still recommended for unvaccinated individuals.
- **Let me emphasize again, our primary goal is for all students (other than those participating in the Digital Education Center) to be in school and receive in-person instruction every school day throughout the entire school year,** and it is my full expectation that we will continue to do so until and unless mandated to do otherwise by the Maryland State Department of Education or Howard County Health Department.
- Though many people have understandably become exhausted with masks, they are a small inconvenience in a greater effort to keep school buildings healthy and open. As I stated in my community message regarding masks, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and masking has been proven to be highly effective in preventing the spread of the virus.
- We are taking careful measures to ensure that schools are healthy environments for students and staff. The pandemic continues to linger, and we want to avoid having to

send students home to quarantine, or risking an outbreak that would require a school building to close.

- We recognize that there will be some students and staff, particularly students with disabilities, who may not be able to wear a mask. We will provide the necessary supports and accommodations to ensure those individuals may still participate in in-person instruction in a safe and healthy manner.
- However, it is also important for parents to be aware that any student who does not adhere to the masking protocols may be in violation of the student code of conduct and subject to disciplinary measures.

### **Mitigation Strategies**

- There continue to be several mitigation strategies implemented to ensure our school buildings remain healthy environments for teaching and learning.
- As mentioned earlier, the best mitigation strategy we have at our disposal at this time is the continued use of masks. Additionally, masks, hand sanitizer and other personal protective equipment, or PPE, will be available at schools for students and staff who require them as we still have large supplies in our logistics center. In an effort to continue to remain ahead of needs, we have ordered additional PPE and will continue to monitor requirements throughout the school year.
- Our custodial staff will continue to complete daily cleaning and disinfecting in alignment with CDC guidance.
- Plexiglass remains in place in the front offices and other areas of the buildings where it was installed last school year.
- If a student or staff member shows COVID-19 symptoms during the school day, each school has identified an isolation room to keep them removed from the remainder of students and staff until they may be able to go home.
- Finally, I would like to address the continued work to ensure that all HVAC systems are operating efficiently and effectively. A significant amount of work was done in our schools near the start of the pandemic to install MERV-13 filters in all buildings where possible and perform maintenance to be sure all units were operating to peak efficiency. Staff are currently performing an additional review of all HVAC units and maintaining any

units that require work. An extensive checklist was developed last year and staff are completing these items in preparation for the start of the school year.

### **Cafeteria Protocols**

- The school cafeteria is one area where masking at all times will not be possible. Students will be required to wear masks at all times when they are not eating or drinking, including when entering and exiting the cafeteria, in the lunch line, throwing trash away, and sitting at their table after finishing their meal.
- Additionally, elementary schools will have assigned cafeteria seating, which will facilitate close contact identification for our younger students if contact tracing becomes necessary and we are exploring ways to provide separation between students at cafeteria tables.
- Hand sanitizing stations are in place throughout the school building, including in the cafeteria, so all students have a chance to use them before eating.
- It is not possible for students to have lunch in the classroom primarily due to challenges with student supervision during the lunch hours and other factors related to distributing food throughout all parts of the building. However, where possible and when weather permitting, students may have the opportunity to eat lunch outside to lessen the number of students in the cafeteria. We will utilize grant funding where applicable to increase the number of monitors to facilitate the use of outside spaces for lunch.
- To further monitor the environment in cafeterias, carbon dioxide - or CO<sub>2</sub> - sensors with data logging capabilities have been installed and will monitor the level of CO<sub>2</sub> in each school's cafeteria. This system will provide an indication of the effectiveness of the outdoor air ventilation in diluting airborne contaminants.
- One suggestion that has been raised by stakeholders is the construction of tents to cover outdoor spaces for eating. This will not be possible for several reasons, with the most constricting related to issues around student and staff safety.

### **Quarantining Procedures**

- We expect that, on occasion, there will be positive cases involving students and staff. The close contact and quarantining procedures that have been in place in Howard County for the past year and a half will continue to be in place this fall.

- With more students in school buildings, it is likely that more close contacts will be identified, requiring unvaccinated students and staff to quarantine for an extended period of time. I would like to emphasize an important point - **only unvaccinated students and adults who are identified as close contacts must quarantine. Vaccinated students and staff will *not* be required to quarantine unless they receive a positive test or are displaying symptoms**, however they will be expected to monitor their symptoms closely for the 14 days.
- If a student must quarantine and be out of school for an extended period of time, we have put in place the following instructional supports:
  - Students will access assignments and instructional resources online through Canvas. Staff are expected to post all assignments in Canvas for each class or subject in a timely manner at the start of each unit.
  - Additionally, students will have access to synchronous supports during designated times of the week. These times will be scheduled during teacher program implementation periods that occur before or after school during the teacher duty day.
- If staff are required to quarantine, instruction will continue. Depending on the reason for the staff quarantine, this will either occur virtually with the classroom teacher or through a substitute teacher.
- Of course, many of these procedures may be avoided if all students and staff who are eligible choose to receive the vaccine, which I strongly encourage.

## Staffing

- Human Resources staff and school based administrators continue to work hard to staff schools.
- Every day the number of vacancies decreases as teachers and support staff are hired. I will continue to update the Board on vacancies and additional staff are hired.
- Our New Educator Orientation begins on Monday and we are looking forward to welcoming over 350 educators who will be beginning their first full year with the Howard County Public School System.

## Digital Education Center

- In April, we reached out to families to first gauge interest, and then gather commitments in early May for a virtual learning opportunity that is now known as the Digital Education Center or DEC.
- In June, the Board endorsed a plan for the DEC to serve students in grades K-6 who had committed to participate during the spring commitment period. The K-6 grades were selected because that age group of students is not yet eligible to be vaccinated.
- Since that time, staff have received emails from families who did not meet the commitment deadline but who are now interested in participating. These families have been directed to complete a school reassignment request by today, August 12th. Those requests are being reviewed by staff, and decisions will be communicated to families in a timely manner as we recognize that we are just a couple weeks away from the start of school.
- I want to remind the community that we are committed to a normalized return to instruction but there are three distinct ways students will receive instruction this fall.
  - Most students in grades K-6 will receive instruction in school.
  - Some students in grades K through 6 will receive instruction through the DEC.
  - Finally, some students may qualify for the home-and-hospital teaching program and instruction will be delivered in that model.

## **Transportation**

- As we welcome approximately 58,000 students back into our school buildings and work through the many challenges that arise while still in the midst of a pandemic, we must also work through a shortage of bus drivers.
- I know that many families are used to receiving their bus schedules two weeks prior to the start of the school year, and I ask for your patience and understanding as we work through challenges with developing bus routes for this school year. The bus locator will be available on the HCPSS website by Tuesday, August 24th.
- We greatly appreciate the strong push by partner organizations and groups across Howard County this summer to assist our contractors in attracting more drivers. Despite these efforts, we only have 80% of the drivers necessary to cover all of our routes. This equates to 93 current vacancies. Many of our neighboring counties, and school districts across the United States, are experiencing a similar driver shortage.

- We have reached the point where, in order to continue to provide transportation services to all eligible students, using the existing buses and drivers we have available, bus routes and bus stops may look different than what you are used to seeing.
- There will be schools where buses will have to double up routes, picking up and dropping off students in groups. For example, Bus 100 would pick up and drop off students assigned to Group A and then circle back to pick up Group B. Every effort is being made to minimize the impact on our students and schools.
- This will create a larger-than-typical window of time between when the first students are dropped off at school and the time instruction begins. The first group of students will be dropped off at school approximately 30 minutes prior to the arrival time of the second group. All students will have at least 10 minutes for breakfast prior to the start of the instructional day. The same process will take place after school with the goal of no more than 30 minutes between the time the first and second groups leave school.
- Students who are at school and awaiting instruction or bus pickup will be supervised by HCPSS staff. Administrators will be working on plans with their staff to include the types of activities students may engage in and will communicate school level details for students who will be at school before and after the instructional day. Please note that this will not impact the number of instructional hours students receive.
- We will monitor ridership and driver vacancies and make adjustments to the schedule as we are able. When the full bus schedules are finalized and available online, all bus riders will have scheduled pickup and drop-off times so families may adequately plan.
- It is our goal to limit the number of instances buses must double back for additional students and to minimize the impact on students and families. I know this will be burdensome for some of our families and we will continue to look for additional solutions.
- A message will be sent to our community following this meeting to provide this information.
- As I stated in my Superintendent's Report, I urge anyone interested in becoming a driver to call our transportation office at 410-313-6732 as soon as possible.

## **Meals**

- School breakfast and lunch will be served in the cafeteria at no cost to students through the entire 2021-2022 school year, on every day that schools are open. All meal service

will be grab and go, with no self-service or a la carte items offered. However, students will have more meal choices than were available last year, and a faster meal service process has been designed to reduce the time spent in meal lines. I want to repeat what I said earlier: Masks will be required in all cafeterias except when students are seated and eating.

- Meals will also be available for students enrolled in the Digital Education Center. These meals will consist of grab and go breakfasts and lunches, which may be picked up at any high school on Mondays and Thursdays, with three days of meals provided on Mondays and two days of meals provided on Thursdays. Additional details are available on our website and will be provided to families.

## **Technology**

- Before I hand it over to the Board for questions, I will provide a brief update related to technology.
- In pre-kindergarten, school system-issued laptops will remain at home during the first semester. Laptops will be brought to and remain at school for the second semester.
- In kindergarten and first grade, school system-issued laptops will primarily remain at school and not be required to be transported to and from home each day.
- Students in grades 2 through 12 will be expected to bring school system-issued laptops back and forth to school each day.
- Power outlets will be available to students at school as needed to ensure their devices remain charged.
- Additionally, all families who have received hotspots from the school system will be able to continue to use those.

## **Conclusion**

- Board members, the report I have just completed provides clarity on the primary questions being asked by Board members and stakeholders. This was not an exhaustive detail of every item staff are working on, as that presentation could have lasted for hours. However, staff is available to answer any remaining questions that Board members may have.

- Additionally, I ask the Board and all students, families and staff to continue to be patient and flexible as we navigate this ongoing pandemic. Issues are certain to arise that we will navigate in a manner that is as transparent, thorough, and collaborative as possible.
- A comprehensive message based on this update will be sent to families tomorrow morning. A separate transportation update and announcement regarding the staff vaccine requirement will be shared with the community this evening.
- I am grateful for all of the efforts of each stakeholder to do the things necessary to ensure our school communities remain healthy environments for instruction and support, so that we may be able to keep students in schools for the entire school year.
- This concludes my report.