

January 12, 2021

Mount Vernon Community School District Families and Staff:

The purpose of this letter is to provide you the latest COVID-19 update, along with information on transitioning to a traditional learning model next week with students attending school five days a week. Here is current data for the District with regard to COVID-19:

Current 14-day average positivity rate for Linn County: 10.1%

Current number of students testing positive for COVID-19: 2

Current number of staff members testing positive for COVID-19: 1

Current number of students currently in quarantine due to COVID-19: 5

Current number of staff members currently in quarantine due to COVID-19: 1

Last week, I had the opportunity to be part of a meeting with Linn County Public Health officials to discuss the current reality of COVID-19 in Linn County. I specifically asked them about the recent uptick in the positivity rate and number of cases in the county and state, to gauge how they are feeling about the current spread of the virus. In working with the Linn County Public Health officials during the pandemic, they have been very careful and cautious when looking at the impact of COVID-19. Overall, they shared they were not overly concerned with the recent uptick; noting it is a bad time to evaluate this fully because of less testing being completed due to the holiday season, and due to the impact of the inclement weather on people getting tested. They are watching the outbreaks in other parts of the country, and while they are currently optimistic they know we are not yet out of the woods.

With the start of the second semester on January 19, 2021, we are still on track to return to a traditional model of learning with students in school five days a week. This was discussed at the School Board meeting last evening, and the Board is in agreement with making this transition. We will continue to review this decision on a daily basis, and will move back to the hybrid model if we feel it is best. The third party remote learning options currently available will remain available for the remainder of the school year to any students interested in these options.

Here is pertinent information regarding the guidance from Linn County Public Health and our return to a traditional learning model:

1. Maintaining social distancing will be a greater challenge with a return to a traditional model of learning. The American Association of Pediatrics recommends maintaining three to six feet of distance when possible, and we'll do what we can to maintain social distancing as much as possible. Diligence in the wearing of masks will become even more important with the transition to a traditional model of learning. If a student or staff member tests positive for the COVID-19 virus, the District will take into account social distancing and the wearing of masks to determine who may be subject to a possible quarantine.
2. With regard to contact tracing as we return to a traditional learning model, the District will consider if masks are worn and worn properly by students and staff members when making decisions as to who may or may not need to be quarantined. Obviously, situations in which students are not wearing masks (lunch, participation in high exertion activities) will result in the quarantining of all identified close contacts.
3. A large part of the meeting with the Linn County Public Health officials focused on the current reality with the COVID-19 vaccines. The roll-out of the vaccines has been slower and more frustrating than they anticipated. The current vaccines are largely going to long-term care facilities for older adults, along with going to health care workers on the front lines. The vaccines in Iowa are also being dispersed across all 99 counties. State and local officials continue to re-work the prioritization of groups who should receive the vaccinations first, and everything is dependent on how much vaccine rolls in and when it rolls in. They could not provide us with a timeline on when school employees may be able to receive the vaccine, and they are asking districts to develop their own priority groups to determine how to disperse the vaccine once it arrives.
4. The issue with a vaccine for children is much more complicated. The current Pfizer and Moderna vaccines only work for people 16 or 18 years of age and older, and studies are still being conducted on younger children. There is no clear timeline on when our students may be vaccinated, but it may not be in time for the start of the 2021-2022 school year. The Linn County Public Health officials thought the general public should largely be taken care of by the end of 2021, but there are still many questions to be answered with regard to the vaccination of those under the age of 16. As we think about planning for 2021-2022, we will hopefully be back to closer to normal in many ways while still likely needing to engage in a variety of mitigating measures to keep the virus at bay.
5. The third party remote learning programs including Edmentum and Apex will remain available for any students who wish to learn remotely for the second semester. If your child is wanting to change from 1st semester remote learning to face-to-face learning or vice versa, please communicate that with the building principals if you have not done so already.
6. Edmentum will continue to be offered to students in grades K-5. Ms. Martin will return to the regular classroom setting with the start of the second semester, but will continue to offer Edmentum support. Mrs. Bruner will continue to offer support at the middle school.
7. Apex will continue to be offered to students in grades 6-12 with the same support as first semester.

8. Students in grades K-8 may move in and out of remote learning at any point during the second semester. While we do not advise making multiple changes from one model of learning to another, such requests will be honored.
9. Students engaged in the Apex program in grades 9-12 need to decide by February 1, 2021, if they wish to remain in the Apex program or wish to move to the traditional model of learning. Students currently engaged in the Apex remote learning program may continue to do so, and new students wishing to transition from the current hybrid model to remote learning may do so at the beginning of the second semester. Because high school learning is tied to the earning of credits toward graduation, the February 1, 2021, deadline is important in determining if a student wishes to make a move in or out of the remote learning model.
10. There have been more inquiries regarding travel completed over the winter break, and travel being considered for spring break and other periods of time during the second semester of the school year. The District expects that families will follow the guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control pertaining to national and international travel, including engaging in proper testing and quarantining. Here is the link to the guidelines from the CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html>

As I shared before the break; the transition to a traditional learning model will be supported by those of you who have been frustrated by the hybrid model, and will be met with consternation by those of you who have felt the hybrid model has been successful. I believe the hybrid decision was the prudent decision at the time; and believe with where things stand with COVID-19, and what we know about the low incidences of virus spread in school communities, that the best decision with regard to student learning and social-emotional growth is to move back to a traditional model of learning. This is also one more reminder to stay home if feeling ill in any way, and working with a healthcare provider to determine how best to address the illness. This is especially important as we return to a traditional model of learning.

Let's remain united in support of our students and staff as they continue to do great things in challenging times.

Dr. B.