

November 18, 2020

Mount Vernon Community School District Families and Staff Members:

After consultation with a variety of people both inside and outside the district, including educational and health officials, I am pausing all high school activities beginning tomorrow, Thursday, November 19, 2020, through Sunday, December 6, 2020. I have consulted with the members of the School Board, and have their support with this decision. The plan is for high school activities to resume on Monday, December 7, 2020. As you are likely aware, a proclamation by Governor Reynolds issued this past Monday had already suspended youth activities, including elementary and middle school activities and sports, through December 11, 2020. However, she did allow high school activities to remain in place for the time being. I have based this decision on the following factors:

1. Student learning is the most critical aspect of the programming for our students, and everything possible should be done at this time to protect student learning during the pandemic.
2. The overwhelming sentiment shared by students, staff, and parents during this school year is the desire to avoid moving to a remote learning platform. Pausing activities for a few weeks allows the District the best chance to remain in the hybrid model, as being in school with mitigation measures in place does not appear to contribute significantly to community spread of the virus.
3. Pausing activities will reduce the possibility for the quarantining of larger groups of students due to close contacts in practices and competitions.
4. We have a key role to play in the broader community sense to do our part to keep everyone safe. Hospitalizations and rates of positive COVID-19 tests are at record high numbers, and it is important for the District to do its part to help mitigate the spread.
5. There is a great deal of stress on the local health care systems at this time, and doing our part to help mitigate the spread of the virus by pausing activities will hopefully assist these systems in meeting the needs of people more easily.
6. Even though coaches and activity directors have put in place a variety of safety steps for practices and rehearsals, it is still very difficult to protect against the spread of the virus when students are in frequent close contact with one another. This is especially true of the contact sports of basketball and wrestling.
7. Pausing activities during this period of time will allow the District to see the impact of the Thanksgiving holiday on the spread of the virus, as many health experts expect the holiday season to be a time of concern for greater spread of the virus.
8. Many local health officials have shared with us that the most important mitigating measure we could put into place other than the wearing of masks and social distancing is the temporary pausing of activities.
9. Other local districts who have considered a similar move, but have chosen not to pause activities, are of the belief that ultimately positive tests within the activities will lead to quarantine situations of various activity groups. I am supporting a more proactive as opposed to a reactive approach at this time.

In practical terms, this means that all high school practices, competitions, and performances for athletic, fine arts, and other extracurricular activities will be suspended until December 7th. It is the hope at that time that we will be able to reinstate these activities, and we will reassess our readiness to do so during the week of November 30th. Coaches and activities directors may remain in contact with participants during this time, and may encourage individual work to be completed by students at home. However, groups of students in the various activities should not gather in locations outside of school to practice or perform in any manner. Co-Curricular groups like band, choir, and orchestra may continue to meet during the day, and students may continue to earn credit for these classes. They may also continue to prepare for concerts that may still take place after December 7th.

Once activities are allowed to return all competitions, concerts, and events will be subject to the guidelines in the proclamation from Governor Reynolds that allows for only two people per student participant to attend events. We will continue to offer online options to view these events.

This is a very difficult recommendation for me to make as someone who was involved in athletics and the arts in high school, and who has coached numerous sports over the years. I understand the social-emotional importance of involvement in activities, and the positive attributes one develops from being involved in such activities. I know this is a major motivating factor for many students to engage in school, and we have worked hard throughout the course of this year to provide as normal a school experience as possible for our students. However, at this time the higher priority is the health and well-being of all community members. It is my hope that a temporary pause now will help keep students in school, and will give us the best chance to be able to engage in activities over the long haul.

On another note, people continue to ask about whether the District is considering a move to remote/virtual learning at any time in the near future. As I shared earlier in this letter, the majority of students, staff, and parents want school to remain open as long as possible. When I made the recommendation to remain in the hybrid model for the second quarter, I envisioned a time where that decision would be put to the test as the number of COVID-19 cases increased. I am still confident that we can remain in the hybrid model and provide in person learning to our students, as we are not seeing evidence of spread of the virus related to attending classes on an every other day basis. The local districts who have decided to move to remote/virtual learning are doing so largely due to issues with maintaining sufficient staffing levels. We continue to be fortunate in that our staff has remained relatively healthy, and staffing our programs has yet to be an issue. This could change at any moment, but I am confident we can stay status quo with the hybrid model. For the sake of comparison, currently in the Grant Wood Area Education Association 43% of districts are providing full-time traditional learning, 19% are in a hybrid model, and 38% are engaging students in virtual learning. As always, thank you for your support and understanding, and please let me know if you have any questions.

Dr. B.