



SIMSBBURY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

To the Simsbury Public Schools Community:

As July turns to August, our preparations to open the Simsbury Public Schools for 2021-22 kick into high gear. While opening during the COVID pandemic is a much more manageable task than it was a year ago, it is not without its challenges. This communication is designed to give you the best information we have with one month to go until school starts. Some frequently asked questions are still unknown, but we thought it was important to share the latest updates we have from the CT Department of Public Health (DPH) to help you prepare for the school year ahead.

Fortunately, Simsbury is in a relatively favorable position based on public health metrics. Case rates have remained very low over the course of the summer, and the overall vaccination rate among individuals aged 12 and up is almost 90% in our town. Obviously, the rise in cases over the last few weeks due to the Delta variant is a concern compared to where we were in May/June, but we remain confident that our schools will open safely.

Last week, the DPH restarted a series of weekly calls for superintendents and other school leaders to discuss the fall reopening. Here are some highlights of the information that was shared.

Vaccinations – The DPH continues to stress that the most important mitigation strategy is vaccination. In Simsbury, the vaccination rate among those aged 12-15 was approximately 60% as of a few weeks ago, and the rate for those aged 16-18 is even higher, though we do not have an exact number as the data is not broken down in that specific range. If you have a child in the 12-18 age range whom you wish to have vaccinated before school starts, the time to begin the process is now. Pfizer is the approved vaccination for those 18 and under, and there is a three-week gap between first and second shots. Fortunately, vaccine appointments are no longer difficult to get, so please take action soon if it is your intention to have your child vaccinated.

Mask Wearing – We do not have final guidance from the DPH or the Connecticut State Department of Education regarding mask wearing, and we may not get any until shortly before school reopens. We do know that students are not required to wear masks when outside (i.e., recess or outdoor instruction). Unless new regulations are issued, masks remain required indoors in school and whenever students are riding the bus, per the Governor's executive order. We recognize this is an important topic for all, and we will communicate any updates in a timely manner.

Physical Distancing and Cohorting – We will implement physical distancing of 3 feet when feasible. Cohorting of students remains a recommended strategy, though it can be carried out with somewhat more flexibility. For instance, we will continue to have elementary students remain in cohorts for the majority of the day (including lunch tables), but we are not going to enforce cohorting during outdoor recess. Students from different cohorts will be pulled together for things such as music lessons and academic interventions.

Handwashing and Respiratory Etiquette – One thing we know from last year is that frequent handwashing and sanitizing helped keep the spread of respiratory illnesses (not just COVID) to a minimum. The emphasis on these strategies will stay in place in 2021-22, and we will continue to ask all members of the school community to remain home if they are sick.

Contact Tracing and Quarantining – The school district will continue to contact trace positive cases. The most important thing to note here is that vaccinated people who are asymptomatic are not required to quarantine even if they are a close contact with a positive case. Unlike last year, we will not automatically send an entire elementary cohort home for quarantine due to a positive case; instead, we will contact trace using the guidance of less than 3 feet of distance for 15 minutes or more. Final determinations about quarantine periods will be made by the Farmington Valley Health District (FVHD), but we are confident that the length of quarantines will be shortened for people who submit negative PCR test results.

Cleaning of Facilities and Ventilation – Given that contaminated surfaces do not present a significant risk of transmission for COVID, the DPH has directed school districts to return to daily, routine cleaning of school facilities. We will also return to the normal use of areas such as cafeterias, gyms, and art rooms. All recommendations about enhanced ventilation (i.e., maximizing fresh air intake) remain in place, and the Simsbury Public Schools will continue to contract with the same vendor that we used last summer to implement recommendations in this area.

School Events and Activities – The goal is to return to as much normal activity as possible, with the exception of very large indoor gatherings. So, while we do not see the immediate return of large assemblies or concerts, we are planning for after-school activities at all levels. We believe we can safely manage the return of visitors to the building, and conduct events such as Open House in person. We value these important events and activities and are eager to see their return to the school calendar.

I hope that this communication has been helpful to you in getting some idea about how things will look and feel for the upcoming school year. I will write again in a few weeks as new information becomes available. If you have questions about our procedures for the upcoming year, I ask you to direct them to our district's identified COVID-19 liaison Neil Sullivan, Assistant Superintendent for Administration. He can be reached at nsullivan@simsburyschools.net.

Enjoy the remaining weeks of summer!

Matt Curtis
Superintendent of Schools