

Dear Simsbury Parents/Guardians —

As you know, the Governor and the Commissioner of Education have now issued guidelines for the reopening of K-12 schools in Connecticut. Given the very positive data trends in our state that demonstrate a successful effort to contain community spread of the virus, the plans call for a return to in-person teaching and learning to the greatest extent possible. In Simsbury, our Reopening Task Force and administrative team have been planning for that same goal for the past month and a half, and we are encouraged by the direction set by the guidelines. However, it is important to note that the guidelines do not mean a return to "normal" schooling as it existed just a few months ago. In this communication, we hope to share with you some of significant mitigation strategies that we will need to implement in order to bring our students and staff back to school — where they belong. In moving beyond the stay-at-home strategy that was clearly necessary over the last few months, our goal is to give you the confidence that we will be doing as much as reasonably possible to ensure the health and safety of our community members.

You should know that the guidelines released by the state are based on the latest COVID-19 data trends. The guidelines can be adjusted by the state if trends change, and our school district will continue its close collaboration with the Farmington Valley Health District both in generating initial plans for reopening and in responding to potential changes in infection rates. If you would like to read the documents that have been issued by the state, we have posted them on the [COVID-19 information page](#) on our website for your convenience.

While we are excited to announce our plan for the 2020-21 school year to begin with a return of in-person learning for all students, we certainly recognize that there are many challenges ahead for the Simsbury Public Schools. We are dedicated to finding the best possible solutions to those challenges by pursuing the mitigation strategies that are supported by science. We will be prepared to adjust our plans based on changing conditions. If we need to pivot toward distance learning again or to a hybrid model (combination in-school/at-home plan), those contingencies are being developed.

As requested by the Commissioner, parents will have the option to keep their child home and to access distance learning if they feel their child (or someone in their household) is at higher risk for complications from COVID-19. For our planning purposes, we will be reaching out to families shortly after July 4th weekend to ask them to identify their preliminary intentions in terms of sending their children back or keeping them home. Once we have that information, we can begin to plan for the structure of the distance learning experience, which is still to be determined. Similar to this process for families, we will develop plans for faculty and staff who may be at higher risk and are unable to return to the school building.

INITIAL STRATEGIES FOR A RESPONSIBLE SCHOOL OPENING

Below is a brief outline of some of the overall strategies that we will be implementing in the Simsbury Public Schools for the coming year. There are likely to be more as we continue to plan. If there is one thing we have learned over the course of the pandemic thus far, it is the need to remain flexible. We ask you to review this information carefully as you consider the preliminary intentions for your family; it is our belief that the vast majority of students can return to school safely under these conditions.

A) Maximize Social Distancing

- Guaranteeing six feet of social distancing at all times in the school setting is not possible. With that said, we are committed to maximizing social distancing in classrooms and other settings through purposeful arrangement of seating.
- At the elementary level, classes in typical grade level rooms will be limited to approximately 18 students. We have already experimented with seating at each school and know that this is a workable plan. If class groups ("cohorts") are larger than that, they will be moved to larger spaces or a classroom/teacher will be added to that grade level. Students will remain in their cohort throughout the day.
- At the middle school, students will remain in the same cohort throughout the day to the greatest extent possible. Again, class sizes will be limited to ensure social distancing or will be assigned to larger spaces.
- At the high school, it is not possible to maintain a cohorting strategy since students take such a wide variety of courses. We are looking at schedule options that would minimize the amount of movement that would happen in a given day. High school classrooms are typically larger, which helps with social distancing (in combination with masking).
- Hallway transitions will be minimized at all levels. Specials teachers will travel to classrooms. In some cases (PE, choir, etc.), classes will be held outside (weather permitting).
- Lunches will be served in classrooms at the elementary and middle levels. A lunch plan for the high school is still being considered.
- Given that we are already several months into the pandemic, students largely understand the reason for social distancing; in that sense, we will not be teaching a new concept but rather reinforcing one that has been taught by families.

B) Hand Hygiene and Other Health Considerations

- We will require frequent hand washing for both students and staff including at key transitions (lunch, recess, etc.). Hand washing routines will be an explicitly taught skill at the elementary level.
- Hand sanitizer has already been purchased in bulk — literally, 55-gallon drums. Bottles of hand sanitizer will be available in all classrooms, and custodians will be able to refill from the drums on-site.
- In addition, hand sanitizing stations have already been installed at a variety of locations in the school, including main entrances.
- Some plexiglass partitions will be installed in high-traffic areas such as offices.
- Nurses are developing protocols for isolating students and/or staff who might exhibit COVID-19 symptoms and for quarantining those members of the community who may have had an exposure to a confirmed case.
- We will continue to seek out and follow all medical advice offered to us through our partnership with the Farmington Valley Health District.

C) Face Coverings

- The current guidance is that all students and staff must wear a face covering that completely covers the nose and mouth. This will be the standard unless contraindicated by a medical professional.
- We ask students and staff to use their own face coverings, or we will supply a face mask to those who do not have one for the day.
- Face shields may be worn in addition, but not in place, of masks.
The Governor's guidelines indicate the teachers can remove the mask "during instruction." That removal should only be the case when full social distancing can be achieved.
- In addition to times when they are eating, students will be given opportunities, primarily outside, to remove their masks while properly distanced.

D) Enhanced Cleaning and Disinfecting Techniques

- Our custodians will continue with enhanced cleaning and disinfection of classrooms on a daily basis. To that end, we have purchased electrostatic spraying machines that will increase their efficiency in disinfecting surfaces.
- Bathrooms will be cleaned and disinfected twice daily.
- We have implemented the use of cleaning logs so that occupants know that their space has been sanitized.
- As you know, disinfecting wipes remain a hard-to-get item, but our vendor has assured us that we are a priority institution and that the supply chain will catch up before the start of school. Wipes have also been added to our "ready-stock" items to ensure consistent supply after that.

E) Transportation

- Needless to say, school buses offer a greater challenge in terms of social distancing. In our upcoming outreach to families, we will be asking parents who can provide their own transportation to and from school to please do so. This strategy will help us to decrease the number of bus passengers.
- Face coverings are also required during bus transportation.

Our Reopening Simsbury Schools Task Force is scheduled for its next meeting on Wednesday, July 8th. By that time, we will have had the opportunity to fully digest the guidelines issued by the Governor and the Commissioner of Education and to give greater shape to some of our preliminary conversations

Obviously, there is still much work to do, but we are pleased that the efforts we made even before the guidelines were issued were right on target. We are also sure that you have many thoughts, concerns, and questions about next school year. Thank you for your support and patience as we develop more detailed plans.

Thanks also for working your way through this admittedly lengthy but important letter. Our next planned update about reopening will come on July 15th, but we will be reaching out to families in the week before that through a questionnaire about your intentions for the upcoming year.

Sincerely,

Matt Curtis
Superintendent