



Renewal

Helena Public Schools 21/22



Draft Plan for the 2021/2022 School Year



Message from Superintendent Rex Wertz

Fellow Helenans,

As Montanans, we are all too familiar with fires in an around our beautiful state. Each summer, brave first responders hike, drive, fly, and parachute into untamed blazes to protect our natural resources and keep our homes and structures safe. Like many of you, I have spent many summers working hand-in-hand with others fighting fire across Montana, Alaska, and throughout the United States. These challenging opportunities grew me as a person as I came to better understand myself, the interconnected value of a committed team, and the awesome, often untamable power of nature.

While the pandemic of the past fifteen months is far from a fire, there are certain parallels. Both are rightfully synonymous with fear, threaten the fragility of life, and cause devastation in their wake. As a world, nation, state, and community, we have lost a lot since March 2020. The scars of the pandemic are evident, both physically and emotionally. But, with every spring comes growth and even the most destructive blazes begin a cycle of needed renewal.

As we look to close this 2020/2021 school year, our hopes turn to brighter days ahead and promise of life beyond the protections and precautions of the past year. Renewal is on our horizon and while we cannot change the past, we do have the collective opportunity to journey forward and craft our future.

Within these pages are initial, draft plans for the forthcoming year. This first draft is exactly that, as we are seeking feedback as to how we can improve these plans in the weeks to come. While a return to normal will be welcome, it inevitably brings questions and potential apprehensions as COVID-19 remains active and evolving both locally and abroad. As a first step in this regard, we included a feedback survey in hopes that you will share your thoughts on this developing document.

As incoming superintendent, I was able to start transitioning into this role in April. Throughout this past year, and especially so across the past two months, I have listened carefully to the hopes, needs, and requests of our students, employees, and families. While the 2020-2021 year was far from optimal, we are now at a place where we can plan for a far more normal school year. This provides each of us with something to collectively work towards as we bring renewal to fruition in our day-to-day lives.

In closing, I ask for your partnership and collaboration as we plan forward. I earnestly believe in our collective future and know that life is 10% what occurs and 90% how we respond. We cannot undo the challenges and tragedies of this pandemic, but we do have the opportunity to join hands and earnestly move forward together in mutual growth and renewal.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Rex M. Wertz'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Rex Wertz
Superintendent, Helena Public Schools

“School Year at a Glance”



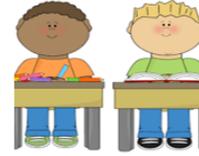
Normal Schedule, Times, and Transportation

We anticipate a return to our normal in-person learning environment including regular start/end times and transportation schedules



Masking Optional

We anticipate that masking will be optional but recommended, especially in close contact, indoor environments.



Collaborative Classrooms

Classroom environments are expected to return to pre-pandemic setups that emphasize collaboration.



Full Activities Schedule

School Programs, extracurricular and cocurricular activities are expected to return to a near-normal schedule and environment



Continued Precautionary Practices

We expect to continue recommended precautionary practices including those listed below

Continued Precautionary Practices

- Frequent Handwashing
- Cleaning of High Touch Surfaces
- Enhanced Air Filtration
- Continued Contact Tracing
- Outdoor Learning Opportunities

Note: As needed, required, or recommended as a result of state/national guidance, precautionary practices may become more restrictive in an effort to preserve the health/safety environment of our schools.



2021/2022 SCHOOL YEAR OVERVIEW

District Priorities

As we proceed towards the 2021-2022 school year, we do so with the understanding that the health and safety of our children remains our highest priority. As in other areas in which in-person is often the optimal mode, the paradox of school within a pandemic brought tried and true instructional strategies into conflict with recommended health and safety precautions. As we move beyond the worst chapters of this pandemic, we must address the unfinished learning of the past sixteen months. While our students, educators, and families gave their all, gaps inevitably exist that we must work to address. The interconnected nature of our priorities moving forward provide the foundation for our below framework of continuity for the forthcoming year.



Health and Safety of our Students, Employees, and Families:

Regardless of how the pandemic progresses, the health and safety of our students, employees, and families remains our utmost priority. Health and safety protocols for the coming school year are expected to be far less restrictive than the 2020-2021 school year. However, as noted below, we intend to continue several, ongoing precautionary efforts including virus-related cleaning and sanitization practices.

High Quality Learning for All: Central to our priorities is the assurance of a high-quality learning environment for all of our students. With the anticipated return to a fulltime, in-person learning environment, the 2021-2022 school year will resemble our pre-pandemic environment. That noted, our teaching and learning environment evolved across the

past year to include numerous practices associated with blended learning that were not previously common to our schools and classrooms. We intend to continue to develop these beyond-the-classroom opportunities in an effort to enhance and interconnect both in-school and beyond-school learning.

Targeted Opportunities to Address Unfinished Learning: In alignment with the above-noted teaching and learning environment, we must amplify our tiered intervention practices to address identified gaps in learning. While intervention practices have always been a core part of our ongoing environment, gaps associated with unfinished learning from across the past sixteen months must be continually addressed and monitored across the 2021-2022 school year and beyond. Interventions included targeted summer opportunities for identified K-12 students focusing on both credit recovery and knowledge and/or skill/gaps.

Dynamic Social-Emotional Support Systems: The continued focus on social-emotional needs must remain ever-present as an ongoing priority for the 2021-2022 school year. Coupled with our tiered academic interventions, our system of social-emotional supports utilizes a similar model to identify specific student needs and align targeted supports accordingly. As we move into a different, more normal phase of this pandemic, continued needs associated with the challenges and traumatic events of the past sixteen months are expected. School and district-based teams will continue to carefully monitor these needs in an effort to regain vigilant and align resources accordingly.

Consistent, Predictable Operational Environment: While school within this pandemic has been marked with constant change, we are planning for a far more stable operational environment as we prepare for the 2021-2022 school year. This includes a return to normal in nearly every operational aspect of our district including start/end times, transportation schedules, classroom environments, and other day-to-day aspects associated with our schools. We must remain ready to address any unforeseen challenges associated with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic but with fully vaccinated rates expected to increase across the summer months, many of our eligible students and employees will have had the opportunity to become fully vaccinated prior to the start of the 2021-2022 school year. At this time, it remains unknown whether vaccines for students under the age of twelve will become available prior to the fall.

Regular School Programs, Extracurricular, and Cocurricular Opportunities: As an important part of the interconnectedness of our students' lives, extracurricular opportunities are expected to return to normal operations for the coming school year. Unless unforeseen challenges hinder our efforts in this regard, athletics, activities, clubs, and other beyond-the-classroom opportunities for students will fully return in the fall. Gathering size limitations and other precautionary practices associated with the past year are not expected. That noted, we will remain vigilant in asking both participants and visitors to assess their personal health and not attend should they feel ill and/or are exhibiting symptoms.

School/District Operations

As we look to the future and the forthcoming 2021-2022 school year, we are projecting a return to normal in nearly every aspect of our school and district day-to-day functions. This return to normal operations includes restoration of our traditional start/end times and full-day, in-person learning. We anticipate that masking will be optional, both indoors and outdoors for all students, employees, and visitors. Projected operations for the forthcoming school year are as follows.

- **Masking Optional (but recommended):** At this time, we anticipate that masking will be optional for the forthcoming school year. That noted, guidance from the CDC pertaining to next year has not been released but is expected in the coming weeks. This will remain an area of ongoing monitoring across the summer months. Please note that while state laws preclude differentiated practices based on vaccination status, it is likely that we will recommend but not mandate the use of masks for anyone not fully vaccinated.
- **Collaborative Classrooms:** Class sizes, classroom setups, and school operations will return to pre-pandemic formats. Classroom furniture that is more conducive to in-class collaboration will be utilized including group settings, tables, and other furniture that may have been temporarily suspended during the 2020-2021 school year for precautionary, guidance-related reasons. While distancing will be more challenging in this regard, we will still strive to provide students and employees with needed personal space as allotted within each classroom.
- **Normalized Transportation:** Transportation schedules and ridership practices will return to a pre-pandemic format including normal pick-up and drop-off times. Over the past year, our school district reduced per-bus ridership to allow for needed distancing. We also utilized school-specific bus routes to eliminate the possibility of students from multiple schools riding at the same time. While successful, these protocols are not synonymous with the normal start/end times and day-to-day schedule that we plan to return to for the 2021-2022 school year. Please note that masking may be required on buses as part of a federal mandate related to public transportation. We expect updated guidance in this regard over the forthcoming summer months.
- **Continued Precautionary Practices:**
 - Enhanced Filtration Systems: Over the past year, the Helena Public Schools have worked to upgrade our air circulation and filtration systems. This included efforts to ensure that each

classroom experienced no less than four (4) air changes per hour of clean air (fresh or purified). We will continue the use of enhanced filtration practices across the coming school year including ongoing efforts to upgrade and maintain our ventilation systems.

- Cleaning of High-Touch Surfaces: Proper sanitization of high touch surfaces will remain an ongoing area of focus including handrails, doorknobs, light switches, etc.
- Frequent Handwashing/Sanitization Opportunities: Students have become accustomed to the increased frequency of handwashing and/or sanitization opportunities which we plan to continue in the coming year.
- Contact Tracing: In alignment with local health protocols, we will continue to assess each confirmed COVID-19 case for close contacts. As required, close contacts may be expected to quarantine for a defined period of time.
- Outdoor Opportunities: When applicable, access fresh, outdoor air either through the opening of windows and/or the utilization of outdoor learning spaces/opportunities.

Response to Identified Cases:

While our plans to return to a more normal teaching, learning, and operational environment are welcome news after the challenges of the past year-plus, we must remain ready to respond to virus related challenges that are likely to continue to occur within our schools and community. Rather than the multi-phase approach that we utilized across the past sixteen months, our response to identified cases will become more case specific in nature. This is due to the predicted, continued decline in daily cases and the ever-rising vaccination rate across our schools and county. Actions related to identified cases include the three below-noted levels of consideration.

Action #1: Should a confirmed COVID-19 case be identified, health professionals will assess the specific class/cohort for any identified contacts. Contact tracing and quarantine practices are expected to continue to align with local, state, and national guidance. That noted, mandatory quarantine orders may continue for any identified close contact.

Action #2: Beyond a class/cohort, contact tracing is expected to consider other potential areas of virus exposure including carpools, bus transportation, cross-classroom environments, and involvement in extracurricular opportunities. That noted,

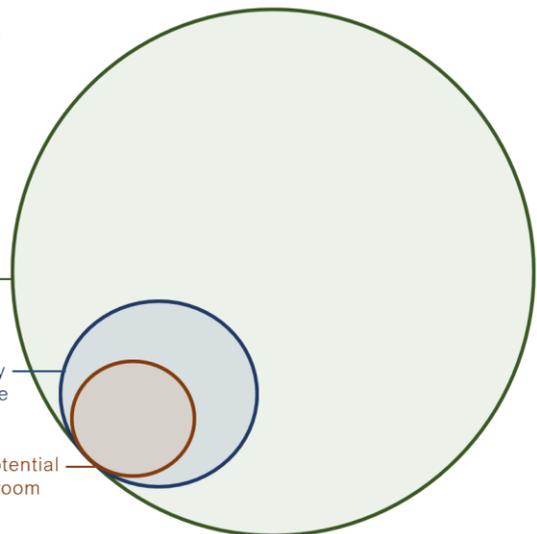
students may be identified as a close contact even if they do not attend school within the same classroom and/or cohort as a student or employee that tested positive for COVID-19.

Action #3: As needed, health professionals will evaluate potential exposure and levels of virus activity across a school. Should virus activity, exposure, and/or transmission rates reach a concerning level, restrictive precautionary practices may become necessary. As a district, we will do everything within our power to prevent requiring more restrictive precautionary practices within our schools, but should these decisions become necessary for the health and safety of our students, employees, families, and community, we act accordingly.

Action #3: As needed, identify any potential contacts within the school and address accordingly

Action #2: As needed, identify any potential contacts within the grade level and/or via transportation

Action #1: Identify any potential contacts within the classroom



Anticipated Next Steps

As noted, this draft represents an ongoing effort to prepare for the forthcoming 2021-2022 school year. This initial draft aligns with the below feedback opportunity. As we receive feedback from families, employees, and our community, we will work to consider necessary changes. Additionally, we expect to receive state and national guidance across the coming weeks and months. As a district, we will work to incorporate this guidance into our developing plan. Please expect that this draft will be continually updated and shared across the summer months of June, July, and August. In addition, we will share/post plans associated with utilization of Elementary & Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds (ESSER) including plans required at both the state and federal levels.

Feedback Needed

As you read through and consider our draft plans for the 2021-2022 school year, please consider sharing your feedback through the below-linked survey. We value your insights and appreciate any time that you are willing to contribute to this collaborative effort. Specific, school-level plans will be derived from this district-level plan so as you consider the information shared within this draft, please take into consideration, and share your perceptions as to how these plans will help shape what occurs on your school campus across the forthcoming year.

[Plan Feedback Survey Link](#)

Questions & Answers

Will masks be required during upcoming summer programs?

Required indoor masking is expected to be considered by the HSD Board of Trustees as part of Policy 1905. Should changes be made to this policy that potentially inform health/safety practices during summer programs, we will work to implement these changes as quickly as possible.

Will students still have remote or blended learning options for school attendance?

Similar to our planned Phase III associated with the 2020-2021 school year, remote or blended options are expected to be limited to only those students who are most in-need from a medical standpoint. As such, our planned environment for the coming school year does not include an extensive digital option similar to the Digital Learning initiative (DLI) that was utilized across this past school year. More information in this regard is forthcoming but students/families should expect to attend school in-person unless extenuating medical circumstances preclude physical attendance.

Will vaccines be mandatory in any regard (students and/or employees)?

At this time, we are not anticipating COVID-19 vaccines to be mandatory in any regard. We will continue to work alongside local, state, and national health authorities to communicate vaccine information including planned clinics. That noted, mandatory COVID-19 vaccines are not anticipated as part of the forthcoming 2021-2022 school year for students, employees, or campus visitors.

Could masking become required if outbreaks occur?

It is possible that masking could become a required precautionary practice should a school or community outbreak occur. This change may necessitate a change in policy, particularly Policy 1905. Please note that at this time, vaccination status cannot be considered as a proxy for such decisions. Therefore, should conditions warrant such an action, required masking could become an expected school practice. Again, the Helena Public Schools will do everything within our power to prevent requiring more restrictive precautionary practices within our schools. However, should these decisions become necessary for the health and safety of our students, employees, families, and community, we will work in concert with health authorities and act accordingly.