

Renewal

Helena Public Schools 21/22





Message from Superintendent Rex Weltz

Fellow Helenans,

Earlier this summer, I shared with you a draft version of our Helena Public Schools 21/22 Renewal Plan. I sincerely thank all of the families, staff and community members who provided feedback and thoughtful comments. Much has changed since then, as we enjoyed a couple months of relatively low COVID-transmission levels followed by the recent and unwelcome arrival of the Delta variant.

While Delta has certainly complicated our efforts to return to a normal school year, one thing hasn't changed: Our commitment to keep our students healthy and return them to the five-day-a-week, in-person academic year they so deserve.

That commitment drives everything contained in the following pages.

The initiatives outlined here are also informed by your survey responses, as well as the hundreds of emails, phone calls and public testimony our HPS leadership has received over the past three months. In a community that is divided over how to respond to the pandemic, there is no way to accommodate everyone's wishes. However, we have listened carefully, and I hope that is reflected in these pages.

In closing, I once again ask for your partnership. I firmly believe that, working together, we will make this a year of growth and renewal.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rex M. Weltz". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping flourish at the end.

Rex Weltz
Superintendent, Helena Public Schools

“School Year at a Glance”



Schedule, Times, & Transportation

We anticipate a return to our normal in-person schedule. Start & end times may be impacted by a shortage of bus drivers. Those who may be impacted will be notified.



Masking Update

As the new school year begins, masking will be required in Pre-K through grade 8. In grades 9-12 we will begin the year with a recommendation to mask.



Collaborative Classrooms

We will continue to encourage social distancing in classrooms.



Activities Schedule



Continued Precautionary Practices

Continued Precautionary Practices

Frequent Handwashing
 Cleaning of High Touch Surfaces
 Enhanced Air Filtration

Continued Contact Tracing as Allowed
 Maximize Outdoor Learning Opportunities

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



2021/2022 SCHOOL YEAR OVERVIEW

District Priorities

As we enter the 2021-2022 school year, we do so with the understanding that the health and safety of our children remains our highest priority. As we move forward with our students back in school five days a week, 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:

Helena Public Schools (HPS) will continue last year's precautionary efforts, including virus-related cleaning and sanitization practices and enhanced air circulation and filtration procedures. We also continue to provide expanded nursing services.

HPS will provide PPE wherever needed to include masks, gloves, face shields and gowns. HPS also is planning to host on-campus vaccination clinics at outdoor sports events for those would like to participate. Watch for more information to come soon (minors will be vaccinated only with parental consent).

Most significantly, HPS will begin the 2021-2022 school year with a mask requirement for grades PK-8. We sought this

change to protect the health and safety of our PreK-8 school communities and to foster the near-normal academic year we all want to see – one with as little disruption as possible for students, parents, and staff. The vast majority of our students at the elementary level, and a substantial number in middle school, are under the age of 12 and don't have the option to vaccinate. Masking is an effective tool to keep them healthy and in school five days a week, which is the goal driving everything we're doing to prevent the spread of COVID in our schools.

The Helena Public School District Board of Trustees voted in August 2021 to give the Superintendent authority to adjust masking policies to be more or less stringent as community transmission rates fluctuate. When community transmission reaches the "substantial" or "high" threshold – which is tracked by Lewis & Clark Public Health based on CDC standards – the Superintendent may require masking for PreK-8 schools. Likewise, when transmission rates drop below the "substantial" or "high" threshold, the Superintendent may remove masking requirements. In short, this change enables the district to quickly adjust as local Covid-19 conditions change.

As we continue through the year, parents will be notified of changes in mask requirements for PreK-8 schools no later than 3 p.m. on Friday for the upcoming school week.

Helena Public Schools remains committed to a COVID response plan that makes sense for our community and will continue to monitor local conditions and adjust our safety recommendations accordingly, including those around face coverings.

Masking remains optional and recommended for grades 9-12 at this time. Regardless of how you feel about masking for this group, we ask for your cooperation so we can focus on what matters – providing a high-quality,

stable learning environment for our students. Please ask your high school student to wear a mask, observe social distancing guidelines and practice good hand hygiene. **And please keep your student home if they're sick.**

Meanwhile, we will continue to evaluate our masking guidelines and other COVID-19 response protocols on a daily basis in coordination with public health officials, local healthcare providers, and the Helena School District Board of Trustees.

High Quality Learning for All: Central to our priorities is the assurance of a high-quality learning environment for all students. With the return to a full-time, in-person learning environment, the 2021-2022 school year will resemble our pre-pandemic environment to the fullest extent possible.

In order to return students to the classroom full-time, the district has returned our teachers to the classroom full-time. HPS has entered a partnership with third-party providers for its Online Learning Program (Edgenuity). The provider for grades K-12 is Edgenuity. Grades 9-12 will also use the Montana Digital Academy. All Edgenuity and Montana Digital Academy teachers are certified by the State of Montana. If you are interested in participating in the Online Learning Program, please contact your child's school administration for assistance with the application process.

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 environment, gaps associated with unfinished learning from across the past sixteen months must be continually addressed and monitored throughout 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 new phase of the pandemic, school and district-based teams will continue to carefully monitor these social-emotional needs in an effort to remain vigilant and align resources accordingly.

Consistent, Predictable Operational Environment: While school within the COVID-19 pandemic has been marked with constant change, we strive to apply lessons learned in the early phase of the pandemic – coupled with effective preventative tools including masking – to foster a more stable operational environment for the 2021-2022 school year. This includes, to the fullest extent possible, a return to normal start/end times, classroom environments, and other day-to-day aspects of school operations. Our success will ultimately depend on the degree to which our students, parents and the broader community embrace masking, vaccination and other preventative measures.

Regular School Programs, Extracurricular, and Co-curricular Opportunities: HPS strives to restore extracurricular activities to normal operations for the coming school year, as conditions allow. This includes athletics, clubs, and other beyond-the-classroom opportunities this fall. Here again, we need the cooperation of students, parents and the broader community to prevent the spread of COVID so we can continue to make these opportunities available.

School/District Operations

As we begin the 2021-2022 school year, our aim is to provide our students with the healthy, stable and productive school year they deserve. We strive to return to normal in as many aspects of day-to-day school and district functions as possible. Projected operations for the forthcoming school year are as follows:

- **Collaborative Classrooms:** Class sizes will return to pre-pandemic formats. To the extent possible, classroom furniture that is conducive to in-class collaboration will be utilized. The emphasis on collaboration will be balanced with the continuing need for social distancing.
- **Transportation:** As with school districts across Montana and the nation, HPS is entering the 2021-2022 school year with an unprecedented shortage of bus drivers. At the time of this writing, HPS is working on an aggressive recruitment campaign with our transportation contractor, First Student. First Student has brought on temporary staff to cover some routes.

HPS also has developed a backup transportation plan that doubles some routes – meaning one driver and bus cover two routes. This means some students would need to catch their bus earlier. The plan will be implemented if there is still a shortage of bus drivers on the first day of school.

HPS will ensure that students who need to catch their bus earlier will return home at their normal time. Early arrivals will be provided breakfast and paras will be employed to provide tutoring and other activities. HPS continues to work aggressively to recruit permanent drivers to support school-day and extracurricular routes. Please note that per federal law, masks will continue to be required on all school transportation.

- **Continued Precautionary Practices:**
 - **Enhanced Filtration Systems:** Over the past year, HPS has upgraded our air circulation and filtration systems. This includes efforts to ensure that each classroom experiences no less than four (4) air changes per hour of clean air (fresh or purified). We will continue the use of enhanced filtration practices throughout 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.
 - **Outdoor Opportunities:** When applicable, schools will access fresh, outdoor air either through the opening of windows and/or the utilization of outdoor learning spaces/opportunities.
 - **Health & Nursing Services:** HPS will continue to offer expanded nursing services. Seven registered nurses will provide health and wellness support to students and staff, as well as education on Covid-19 health and safety protocols.
 - **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):** HPS will continue to provide PPE wherever needed to include masks, gloves, face shields and gowns.

- **Response to Identified Cases:** While our plans to return to a more normal teaching, learning, and operational environment are welcome news after the disruption of the past year-plus, we continue to face new challenges in response to the rise of the Delta variant.

We anticipate COVID cases in our student and staff population in the Fall of 2021-2022. Helena Public Schools will adhere to the following return-to-school/work protocols when individuals are identified as COVID-19 cases (individuals who test positive for COVID-19) or as close contacts. A close contact is defined as an individual who was within 6 feet of a case (person who is positive for COVID-19) for a cumulative period of 15 minutes over a 24-hour period.

