

August 25, 2021

Dear Helena School District Families,

We are super excited for this school year! I'm thrilled to be able to write today to welcome your family back to school in person, five days a week.

I also write today to ask for your help.

As we prepare to return to school next week, I'm confident that we all want the same thing for our students – a happy, healthy and productive school year with children in the classroom five days a week.

This is the motivation for everything we're doing in response to COVID. We want to keep kids in school, parents at work, and families in their routines and we're using the best tools available to do so.

Masking

As I shared with you earlier this month, the Helena School District Board of Trustees has provided me flexibility to initiate a PreK-8 mask mandate when our county's COVID transmission rate is rated "substantial" or "high" by Lewis & Clark Public Health.

After consultation with local public health officials – and given that Lewis & Clark County's transmission rate remains at the "high" level – I have made the decision to require masks for PreK-8.

Effective Aug. 30, masks will be required for all PreK-8 students and staff. Masks are highly recommended, but not mandatory, for grades 9-12.

Here is where I need to ask for your help. We're doing everything in our power to keep students in school. But we can't do it alone. Please help us by wearing a mask, keeping students home if they're sick, and following public health directions if you're identified as a close contact.

Meanwhile, we will continue our district-level work to prevent the spread of COVID. The district will offer our expanded nursing services again this year. Seven registered nurses will provide health and wellness support to students and staff, as well as education on our Covid-19 health and safety protocols. We will continue to 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).

Online Learning Program

Another change I would like to note is that district teachers will not staff our remote learning alternative this year. In order to return students to the classroom full-time, we've returned our district teachers to the classroom full-time. To continue to provide an online learning alternative, the district has entered a partnership with third-party providers. The online learning provider for grades K-12 is Edgenuity. Grades 9-12 will also use the Montana Digital Academy. Both 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 administrators for assistance with the application process.

Transportation

As your principal/s shared with you last week, the district is in the midst of an aggressive recruitment campaign for school bus drivers, as a shortage challenges districts across Montana and nationwide. This will necessitate schedule changes to some routes. If you haven't already, please visit the [Parent Portal](#) to register your student for bus service and receive updates on your student/s route.

Close Contact Protocols

Finally, I would like to share a change to the HPS COVID close contact response protocols we sent you Aug. 13. The protocols were based on Lewis & Clark Public Health guidelines, which were in turn based on CDC guidance.

We have since learned that Lewis & Clark Public Health's close contact response is limited by [House Bill 702](#). Passed during the 2021 Legislative Session, HB 702 prohibits discrimination based on a person's vaccination status.

As a result, Lewis & Clark Public Health will no longer *order* close contacts to quarantine. Instead, close contacts will receive a *recommendation* to quarantine. Our HPS close contact protocols have been updated to reflect this change (see attached). Lewis & Clark Public Health will still require those who test positive for COVID to isolate at home. Again, if you or a family member are ill or receive a quarantine recommendation from the county health department, please stay home so our students can stay in school.

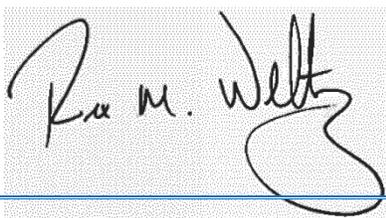
In Closing

Much has changed on the COVID-19 front over the past few weeks as the Delta variant continues to drive up case numbers. However, working together, I remain confident that we can give our students the school year they deserve. Please – get vaccinated, wear a mask, and stay home if you're sick.

Please see the Q&A below for further details on our back-to-school COVID-19 prevention protocols.

By keeping COVID at bay, we can keep learning front and center.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rex M. Wells", is written over a light gray, textured rectangular background.

Rex Weltz
Superintendent, Helena Public Schools

Back-to-School COVID-19 Q & A

Fall 2021

Where will HPS require masks when school starts this fall?

Masks will be required for students and staff at all PreK-8 schools. Masks are strongly recommended, but not required for 9-12 schools.

Masks are required in all indoor areas in PreK-8 school buildings. Please note the following:

- Face coverings are not required when outdoors.
- Face coverings are not required when eating/drinking while maintaining physical distancing as each site/school allows.
- In some circumstances to enhance instructional delivery, staff may lower face covering for a short period of time (several minutes) while teaching, presenting, and speaking or providing directions if they can maintain appropriate distance (6ft) from others.
- When working alone, not with students or members of the public, staff may remove face coverings.
- To be determined by staff, there may be opportunities for students for routine “mask breaks” throughout the day, if appropriate distancing can be maintained.
- Health Exemption:
 - Student: Provide a contraindicated document from your medical provider to your school nurse.
 - Staff/Adult: Provide a contraindicated document from your medical provider to your site principal and District Office HR.

What types of masks or other face coverings are allowed?

For details regarding face coverings (types and proper use), HPS follows CDC [guidance](#). Consistent with last year’s mask guidance, gators, scarves and bandanas are not allowed.

Will masks be required on school buses?

Yes. Per federal law, passengers and drivers on school buses must wear a mask, including on buses operated by public and private school systems.

Will HPS require masks for 9-12 schools?

HPS leaders continue to evaluate the district’s COVID response protocols daily in coordination with public health officials, local healthcare providers, and the Helena School District Board of Trustees. Any proposed change to masking guidelines for grades 9-12 would be presented to the Board of Trustees and would need Board approval. Parents will be notified of any changes to mask requirements no later

than 3 p.m. on Friday for the upcoming school week.

When will the PreK-8 mask requirement be lifted?

The PreK-8 mask requirement will remain in effect as long as local transmission rates remain at the “high” or “substantial” level. These guidelines may be modified, reduced, or extended. Factors that will be used in decision making include, but are not limited to, the local transmission rate (new cases per 100,000 over a 7-day rolling average), local vaccination rate by age group, and district data related to school-associated positive COVID cases and/or transmission.

When there are changes to HPS mask guidelines, parents will be notified no later than 3 p.m. on Friday for the upcoming school week.

HPS is committed to a COVID-19 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.

Will visitors be allowed at PreK-8 schools this fall?

While masks are mandated at the PreK-8 level, HPS will suspend visitors, parents, volunteers, and presenters within the school. Parents are still welcome to come to school and do business at the front office while masked. Thank you for your understanding.

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

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. 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 Alternative Program, please contact your child’s school administrators for assistance with the application process.

What if my student is identified as a close contact?

If your student is identified as a COVID-19 close contact by your county health department, please follow your county health department’s quarantine recommendation. If your student tests positive and is identified as a COVID-19 case, please carefully follow county isolation orders.



CLOSE CONTACT RETURN-TO-SCHOOL & WORK PROTOCOL

If you are identified as a **close contact**, it means you were 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.

The Helena School District will follow these steps for returning students and adults who are identified as a COVID-19 close contact to school or work.

Please note that masks are required for all PK-8 students and staff. Masks are strongly recommended at all times for 9-12 students and staff.

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Return to school/work guidelines for COVID Close Contacts ...

