



September 17, 2021

Dear Helena Public Schools Families and Staff,

As we begin our third week of school, I want to again thank you for helping us make this in-person school year possible. We continue to hear from middle and high school students who are grateful to be back on campus. And as I visit our schools, I'm seeing kids excited about learning in our K-5 classrooms.

Of course, we still face significant challenges, and I want to share updates on a few of them today.

Bus Driver Shortage

When school started last month, I noted the district's efforts to recruit school bus drivers in the face of a national shortage. Despite aggressive community outreach and generous incentives – including free training and a \$4,000 sign-on bonus – we still face a significant lack of drivers.

This has resulted in route changes as well as early arrival times and late home drop offs for some routes, which creates long days for students. We're working on short-term and long-term plans with our transportation contractor, First Student, to address the situation, and I expect to have more details to share in the coming weeks. In the meantime, please know that we understand the bus situation is a hardship for students and families. I thank you for your patience and thank our transportation team for their tireless work to serve our students during this challenging time. If you or someone you know is interested in serving as a school bus driver, please visit [First Student](#).

COVID-19 Update

On the COVID-19 front, we've seen a significant uptick in positive [case numbers](#) among students and staff over the past few days. More than 80 cases have been reported since the first day of school Aug. 30, with well over half reported in the past week.

While other districts are seeing higher case numbers, the increase underscores the need to be diligent about masking, seeking vaccinations for eligible family members and **staying home if you're sick**. To find vaccine locations, visit the county's [COVID-19 Vaccination and Testing Location Tool](#).

We appreciate everything that our students, families, and staff are doing to help us all stay in school. To help get our COVID case numbers headed in the right direction, please encourage your 9-12 student to wear a mask (face coverings made of lace, mesh, hosiery, or other loosely woven material are not protective and do not meet the PreK-8 mask requirement).

Please practice social distancing, keep students' home if they are sick and, if you are identified as a close contact, follow quarantine recommendations from your county health department.

Last but not least, I appreciate the kind and respectful nature that this community has towards others' privacy regarding health matters. Additionally, I want to thank our health care providers for their unwavering dedication to their patients in this extremely trying time. We appreciate them all.

On a fun note, I've thoroughly enjoyed seeing our student athletes on the field, our student body in the stands, and our cheer team providing the energy this fall. Let's harness that team spirit in our fight against COVID. Each of us is a player on this team. And if we each do our part, we can beat this together.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rex Weltz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Rex Weltz
Superintendent, Helena Public Schools