



September 24, 2021

Good afternoon HPS Families and Staff,

It's been a great week across the district with some student achievements to share.

Congratulations to Lucy Lantz and Eric Callery, both seniors at Helena High, who were recently named [National Merit Scholarship Semifinalists](#). Semifinalists represent less than 1 percent of each state's high school seniors. Now that's impressive!

In the music field, I'm proud to report that 24 students representing both high schools have been selected to perform with the All-State Band, Orchestra and Choir Festival in Great Falls October 20-22. The students are selected through a rigorous audition process conducted in the spring and are recognized as the best musicians in the state. I also would like to congratulate 2021 Capital High School Grad Wes Bruski as first place winner in the national [Masters of CAM Wildest Parts Competition](#). Wes, who is studying machining at Flathead Valley Community College, will receive \$3,000 for taking first against some tough competition.

Lucy, Eric, Wes and each of our student musicians remind me that the best part of being an educator is seeing students reach their full potential. The challenges we face right now as parents and educators fade in the bright light of our children's successes.

Of course, those challenges still must be faced, and I'd like to touch on a few of them here.

We continue to face a shortage of bus drivers, para educators, and substitute teachers as local employers compete for a limited pool of available workers. I'm happy to report some good news on substitute teaching opportunities. Effective immediately, the district is raising substitute wages by \$40 a day. The district will now pay \$140 for certified substitute teachers (up from \$100) and \$130 for non-certified (up from \$90). For anyone who enjoys working with kids, substitute teaching can be an ideal opportunity to work the same hours as your child's school schedule.

Pivoting to the bus driver shortage, I again thank you for your patience. We continue to work aggressively on this issue and expect to have details to share early next month. In the meantime, if you or someone you know is interested in driving, please contact our transportation contractor, [First Student](#).

Finally, I'd like to share an update on COVID-19. The district is working with public health officials to finalize a school-based testing protocol for symptomatic students. The first phase will focus on our elementary schools. Parents will be given the opportunity to opt in to testing, and no student will be

tested without parental consent. The rapid COVID tests will be provided free of charge. Watch for more details to come next week on elementary school COVID-19 testing. Phase II will expand testing for symptomatic students to upper grades. The ability to rapid-test symptomatic students will be a powerful tool in our efforts to keep positive cases from spreading in the school environment.

While district-wide case numbers for this week won't be tallied until later this afternoon, we expect only a moderate increase from the total of 37 cases reported last week. Please visit our district website for the [latest case numbers](#). Meanwhile, county health data shows a worsening situation. The Lewis & Clark County Health Department issued a plea to the community this week to take COVID precautions, based on some [sobering local statistics](#). Among the most troubling, is that 20 percent of cases reported county-wide so far this month are among those under 18. This represents a significant threat to our ability to keep kids in the classroom.

Let me be clear: There are **no immediate plans** to shut down schools in our district, as it is our overarching goal to keep our schools open 5 days a week. Our community is doing better than many at keeping COVID out of our schools. I can't thank our HPS families enough for all you're doing to protect your families and our schools.

Have a wonderful weekend,

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 of the last name.

Rex Weltz
Superintendent, Helena Public Schools