



October 1, 2021

Good Afternoon HPS Families and Staff,

While our state is still very much in the grips of the COVID Delta Variant, there were two encouraging pieces of national news this week.

The first is that COVID cases appear to be peaking nationally, with experts predicting we may not see a strong winter surge. We can't let our guard down yet, not even close, as Montana remains firmly planted in the "High" category for transmission rates.

But our prospects of staying in the classroom all year are looking better – if we stay vigilant.

The second piece of great news was that Pfizer submitted clinical trial data to the Food and Drug Administration this week for its COVID vaccine for 5- to 11-year-olds, paving the way to file for emergency authorization. The shots could potentially be available to K-8 kids by year's end.

Giving parents the opportunity to vaccinate elementary and middle school students would be a game-changer for our efforts to keep kids in the classroom. As we watch for new developments, we're talking with local public health officials about the potential for school-based clinics. Vaccination would require parental consent.

In other good news on the COVID front, the district is expanding our free-of-charge, rapid COVID testing program. Principals and other staff are undergoing COVID test training, significantly expanding the number of staff available to administer tests. As I noted last week, the first phase will focus on elementary school students, who don't yet have the opportunity to vaccinate. We'll have more details to share next week.

In non-COVID news, the district will roll out a new busing plan later this month to address the ongoing shortage of bus drivers. Schools across Montana are doing everything from doubling up routes – leading to earlier pick up and drop off times – to canceling some routes altogether. Our very own Helena High English teacher, Jill Sundby Van Alstyne, chronicled the busing crisis in an article this week in the [Montana Free Press](#). A shout out to Jill, who is on sabbatical, for giving us a look at how districts across Montana are responding to the shortage.

Our HPS transportation director, Tom Cohn, and his team have worked tirelessly to develop a strategy that preserves all routes and prevents early and late pick up and drop off times. But we'll need families' help to make it work. Next month, the district will release a rolling bus schedule that will suspend each General Education bus route for limited periods of time (Special Education routes will not be

suspended). Drivers from the temporarily suspended routes will be reassigned to other neighborhoods, allowing us to continue to serve all families the majority of the time without schedule changes.

In other words, we're ensuring that no students, families, or neighborhoods shoulder an unfair burden as we work on long-term solutions. We'll share more detailed information as soon as it's available. I again thank you for your patience as we work through this unprecedented hiring challenge.

The bus crisis goes to show how critical each and every one of our employees is to our collective success. Whether we're a bus driver, a teacher, a chef, a para, or an administrator, we depend on each other to serve our students. So, I ask you to join me in thanking some extremely important coworkers on National Custodian Day. Our custodians are more essential than ever as they work day and night to keep us healthy and safe!

While we're all working hard to meet today's new challenges, we must remember to enjoy life. I look forward to cheering on Helena High this evening as they meet Glacier at Vigilante Stadium and hitting the pavement tomorrow morning for the Sun Run – a race to support the installation of solar photovoltaic arrays in our three newly-rebuilt elementary schools: Bryant, Central, and Jim Darcy. If you'd like to join me, I'll be at the back of the pack maintaining a steady pace to ensure my mobility for the remainder of the weekend.

Register at <https://runsignup.com/Race/MT/Helena/HelenaRunfortheSun>

I hope you enjoy this beautiful fall weekend with your families!

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