



November 19, 2021

Dear HPS Families,

We head into the Thanksgiving holiday during an exceptionally difficult time for our school district and our community.

When student lives are lost in a small Montana city, where our schools are deeply interconnected and woven into the broader community, everyone feels the pain. Providing mental health support to our students and staff will remain a priority for my office through Winter Break and into the new year.

Our district has seen an outpouring of support from our community partners and organizations. While there are too many to name, we are grateful to each of them for supporting our schools. I would also like to thank the staff of Shodair Children's Hospital; Intermountain Comprehensive School Community Treatment (CSCT); Karl Rosston, Suicide Prevention Coordinator for the Montana Department of Health and Human Services (DPHHS); and Kathy Shea, LCSW; for providing critical mental health services to our high schools.

And I would like to recognize and thank our team of school-based counselors, building administrators, teachers, and support staff from across the district for their extraordinary support of our students, families, and staff at Helena and Capital High.

Before we break for Thanksgiving with our families, I want to share a few updates.

Much has happened on the COVID-19 front over the past couple weeks. Vaccinations are now available for kids ages 5-11. More than 360 kids are already registered to receive their first COVID-19 shots at this Saturday's clinic at Bryant Elementary. And plenty of openings are still available for this kid-friendly, free clinic.

This is a community effort for those families that choose to have their children vaccinated and we're grateful to the many individual volunteers and community organizations who are making it possible. And a shout out to the hardworking St. Peter's Health therapy dogs, Mocha and Blue Bonnet, who will join us Saturday to encourage bravery!

Last week, we announced the opening of [free COVID-19 rapid testing sites](#) at three locations in the district for students, district staff, and their immediate household members. Tests are available to both symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals over the age of 2. [Appointments are required.](#)

All of this positive news on the COVID front has led to the question of when we will lift the district-wide mask requirement for grades K-8. Before I address that question, I want to be clear on a couple things:

- The HPS Board of Trustees allowed district masking requirements to be more or less stringent based on transmission rates, which, as of today, remain at the “High” level in Lewis and Clark County.
- I will make the decision to lift the K-8 mask mandate only when we can be reasonably confident that it is safe and responsible to do so, based on lower transmission rates and the professional judgement of our local health officials and medical providers.

With those overarching factors in mind, I am hopeful – with an emphasis on *hopeful* – that we will be able to lift the K-8 mask requirement upon our return from Winter Break in January. Whether local transmission rates will have improved enough to do so remains to be seen.

The pandemic has been a long journey, but there is much in our community to give us hope and to be thankful for, even as we experience loss.

I wish you a wonderful Thanksgiving weekend with your family.

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