



January 07, 2022

Dear Helena Public Schools Families and Staff,

I hope you've enjoyed your first week back in school. While the break was enjoyable, it feels good to be back in our routines.

We will return to school next week under our current mask-recommended status.

When we started school this fall, I made a commitment that I would base our COVID response on local conditions. In early December, our weekly COVID case numbers for students and staff trended significantly downward and were in the single digits as we headed into Winter Break.

The low case counts throughout the district – coupled with enhanced rapid testing capability; the availability of vaccines for kids ages 5-11; and low local hospitalization rates – afforded us the ability to make the decision to come back to school after winter break under mask-recommended status.

I announced the change with a strong caveat: That in the event of a local surge, and in consultation with local health care officials, I would strongly consider a return to a mask requirement.

A local surge is now a distinct possibility. The Omicron variant was first reported in Lewis and Clark County on Monday, and we are keeping a watchful eye on its effect on our district and our local health care providers.

COVID-19 will continue to change and evolve, as will our management strategies. Most assuredly, it is here to stay. Day-by-day, we are moving from emergency response to long-term management of a virus that is poised to become endemic. Adjusting to COVID's ebbs and flows will be a routine part of our operations for the foreseeable future.

I will continue to communicate any status changes with you early and often.

One tool we didn't have as we faced earlier COVID spikes was a robust district testing program, which helps inform our decisions as we get more timely and accurate information at the local level.

Our school nurses, with the assistance of student nurses from Carroll College, MSU-Bozeman, and Montana Tech, will offer free, drive-through COVID tests over the next two weeks at the Lincoln Center (the new Central Office) from 4-7 p.m., Monday through Thursday. **The testing program will be extended as needed after the next two weeks.** If you have symptoms or are asymptomatic, but think

you have been exposed, please get tested. To reduce wait times, please [schedule an appointment](#). Testing will continue to be available during the school day for those who develop symptoms while at school.

Finally, if you haven't already, I respectfully encourage you to talk with your pediatrician about the risks and benefits of vaccination. It is our safest and fastest route to a return to normal.

Have a safe and fun weekend with your families!

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rex Wertz". The signature is stylized with a large, looping "R" and "W".

Rex Wertz
Superintendent, Helena Public Schools

FREE DRIVE-THROUGH COVID TESTING

Monday-Thursday, Jan. 10-13, 4-7 p.m.

Monday-Thursday, Jan. 17-20, 4-7 p.m.

Lincoln Center (District Central Office) at 1325 Poplar.

1. [Click here to schedule an appointment](#)
2. Pull up to the building, stay in your car, and a staff member will come to you.

Thank you for testing to help keep COVID out of our school communities!