

October 18, 2021

Dear Parents and Guardians,

I wanted to share a few updates with you on topics that are currently at the forefront of our discussions. While we are working through many ongoing issues, please know that this takes time. Our priority is the overall safety and well-being of our students and staff, and we appreciate your ongoing patience and understanding.

Transportation

As I communicated previously, all districts are dealing with bus driver shortages. While we have managed to navigate this issue early on, we are experiencing some issues when drivers are absent, as there are not enough substitute drivers to offset absences. In talking with All Star, we have drivers testing in early November, which is the earliest date DMV has been able to accommodate given the backlog across the State. Meanwhile, All Star is doing its best to monitor bus driver absences and to seek out support from other town bus depots.

If you have already had students on any bus that had to be “parked” as a result, we thank you for working with us and finding alternate transportation. Should we notify you that your child’s bus will not have a driver for a particular run, please know that we can typically transport students on a later run if you cannot provide transportation. This will not cause any student to be marked tardy, in the morning, and students will be provided a safe space at school in the afternoon if they are waiting for an alternate bus home.

Quarantining

Quarantining is a difficult subject, both for educators and parents. As a public school, we follow the direction of the DPH and our local Director of Health. Currently, we have been allowed to work from the least restrictive 7-day quarantine (with a 5-day negative test). However, that being said, this continues to be challenging with a full, in-person instruction model now that students are playing sports, riding buses, and engaging in full time learning in classrooms. We cannot reverse the standard protocols in place by DPH, but we can work to try and mitigate some of the issues that continue to come up.

In meeting with my building principals, we plan to ensure the following:

- Maintain the 3 foot distance for all desks, tables, and other furniture where students are seated regularly. ONLY those students within (less than 3 feet) will be considered close contact.
- Whenever possible, and when students need to move, consider the amount of time in closer proximity, and rotate students and student groups as much as possible.

- Since groups are integral to learning, monitor those students working together and limit the number of students who remain together for longer periods of time (so as to avoid the 15 minute cumulative minutes used to determine quarantining).
- Whenever possible, and as the weather permits, take students outside or to other spaces that might allow for additional space.
- Continue to work with DPH as revisions occur and restrictions are eased. Recent information shared with superintendents mentioned the potential for future changes to quarantining. However, I am not certain yet about the details or the timeline for this.
- Parents and staff can still check Newtown's Dashboard that shares current information on cases and quarantining in our district and across schools.

Check-ins During Quarantining

We all agree that in-person instruction is essential to achieve the highest level of quality learning. That being said, we are using our core substitute group to handle online check-ins for students who are out on quarantine. All teachers continue to include their assignments and work on the appropriate platforms (e.g., Google or Seesaw). Mentors meet with student groups to provide direction as needed, or to answer any questions.

There are very thoughtfully prepared assignment schedules developed by teachers, and our school leaders are monitoring what is being presented to students online. To be present, a student needs to be present at each of the scheduled check-ins. If you have any questions about your child's assignment, please reach out to us.

We continue to post positions for additional substitutes, and will be reaching out to our retirees and others in the community who might be willing to work as substitutes. As staffing concerns are minimized, then we will look at increasing some of the screen time for students, specifically for students who might need more support.

Clarification on Vaccinated Individuals and Quarantining

There have been a few questions regarding quarantining of individuals who are already vaccinated. The following are some important points:

- If a vaccinated person tests positive for COVID, they need to isolate themselves at home for 10 days from the date of the positive test.
- In the case that a vaccinated person is exposed to a positive case and has no symptoms themselves, the vaccinated person does not need to be quarantined. Vaccinated people who are exposed to a positive case are advised to be tested on day 3, 4 or 5 after the exposure. If the test result is positive, they would need to isolate themselves from the date of the test or from the date that they developed symptoms, whichever came first.

Volunteers

In alignment with our Return to School Plan, volunteers will be required to wear a mask if visiting schools, as long as health metrics allow. We have started allowing volunteers into venues that are held in larger spaces and outdoors. While we do not have any current policies around volunteers or vaccination status, we have worked to try and mitigate the number of individuals in smaller spaces, such as classroom settings, especially as the number of cases and quarantines increased. Our goal was to minimize the number of adults with our students in limited spaces, but only temporarily. We are hoping to lift restrictions, as appropriate, and responsibly as we can. I will be meeting to discuss this with our leadership team and our PTA Presidents next week as we look ahead to future events.

Again, we are working diligently to navigate many situations this year. Much of this will continue to evolve and we will keep you updated.

Thank you,

Dr. Lorrie Rodrigue, Superintendent