

## **We remain committed to safety, not politics**

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In my 25 years as an educator, I have never received training in pandemic response and epidemiology. Yet, as the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve, school districts across the state and country will step up to make decisions that are well outside of our expertise as educators.

National rhetoric about the opening of school abounds. Thankfully, as the Dubuque community always does, we've risen above politics to serve students and families. We are fortunate to have an outstanding district team in place, strong support from our local health officials and countless community partners.

**As we look toward next year, it is important for the community to know that our return-to-learn decisions are not, and never will be, based on politics. They are squarely based on getting students back in school while providing the safest possible environment for students and staff.**

These decision points did not come based on opinions or politics. These plans have solidified knowing that it is our job as a school district to put steps in place to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission and provide the safest environment possible. To do this, we must rely on science and experts in infectious disease.

Not only have we researched and gleaned best practices from other states, we have also taken advantage of opportunities to learn from medical experts, especially those at the University of Iowa, who have spent their entire careers studying and treating infectious disease and are recognized on a national and global level.

Their presentations were scientifically based and important resources in the development of our plan. They made it clear that social distancing, face coverings and ongoing preventative measures are key in our collective ability to mitigate spread.

A few days ago, we shared our plan to begin the school year in a hybrid learning model for students in all grades, with half of our students attending school each day while learning from home on opposite days. Students and staff will wear face coverings while at school, along with many additional safety and prevention measures in place. Face coverings and other safety measures will be continually reviewed and modified as appropriate based on the evolving data.

The district will also offer a completely online option, with dedicated district staff, for families not comfortable sending their children to school for in-person learning.

In our sessions, another point was made abundantly clear:

**The actions taken by our community *today* will determine what our community COVID-19 situation will be in two weeks.**

We desire more than anything to welcome students back to school in-person. We know that face-to-face learning is unequivocally the best instructional delivery method. We want to see students' smiling faces in classrooms and their excitement for learning with their teacher. These desires, however, must also fit within the reality of COVID-19 in our community.

In looking at the Dubuque County COVID-19 trend data, it is clear that our numbers are currently heading in the wrong direction. Area health experts point to not only enhanced testing efforts, but also to increasing community spread, as contributing to the growing case count. And today's case counts are directly related to our actions (or inactions) as a community over the past two weeks.

One month from now, we will begin to welcome back our students. We will do so in a hybrid format with the goal of moving to fully in-person learning as soon as the data indicates it is safe to do so.

Our actions as a community will directly impact our ability to either improve the COVID-19 situation and move closer to fully in-person learning, or it will worsen and move us to completely online instruction.

Please do your part by following all recommended prevention measures. Our community actions in the next few weeks have a great impact on the upcoming school year.

Our students are counting on you.