

August 7, 2021

School Reopening Update

In May, the school district sent out a number of surveys to students, staff, and parents asking for feedback on how the year went, including successes and challenges, and hopes for the future. At a June work session, the school board discussed the survey results and reflected on the year's protocols and procedures. With the low case counts and rising vaccination rates, we were very hopeful to start the '21-'22 school year with reduced or minimal protocols (i.e. masking, etc.). We hired additional teachers to provide smaller class sizes at the elementary level again, but moved to a more typical schedule in the middle/high school without podding. Also in June, the Borough removed all mandates and disbanded the EOC.

On July 9, the CDC released guidance related to school reopening, and then released an update on July 27. Unfortunately, the rising case numbers and increased presence of the highly transmissible Delta variant in Alaska (and across the country) are creating further concerns for schools and communities. See [Updated CDC guidance as of 7.27.21](#). Here is the latest:

Given new evidence on the B.1.617.2 (Delta) variant, CDC has updated the [guidance for fully vaccinated people](#). CDC recommends universal indoor masking for all teachers, staff, students, and visitors to K-12 schools, regardless of vaccination status. Children should return to full-time in-person learning in the fall with layered prevention strategies in place.

The school board held a work session on July 30 to discuss this latest guidance and consider protocols for the upcoming school year. There is concern about the highly transmissible Delta variant and how it will impact our school and community. There is also concern about universal masking for all students and staff and how it affects teaching and learning. We discussed our "ideal" scenarios (optional masking, attention to hygiene/handwashing, strict symptom free protocols, increased antigen testing, adjusted travel protocols, etc.), acknowledging that we must consider CDC guidance in our reopening plans under the American Rescue Plan requirements as an entity that receives federal funding. As the State of Alaska has no current mandates, the CDC is our primary resource for our medical guidance.

At this point, we are still hopeful for reduced protocols once the school year is underway, but will have to monitor the case counts and evolving data/recommendations in the coming weeks. It is likely the district will start the school year with two weeks of universal indoor masking to get the school year underway after summer travel and to allow a "slow start" while other routines and procedures are being ironed out. Other than masking, nearly all other things will look very much like school has in the past, and we want to keep it that way (i.e. no podding during lunches, using the cafeterias regularly, full course offerings available to students, extracurricular activities, etc.). It is unlikely that plans will differentiate between vaccinated/unvaccinated for masking protocols during the school day. It will either be required universal for all or recommended masking for all. We welcome the community and Borough

Assembly discussing this new guidance in the coming weeks, as we cannot carry the burden of the community's public health alone.

Please be patient and know that this situation will continue to evolve over the coming weeks as we observe case counts and receive new information and recommendations. Our **primary focus** is keeping our students and staff healthy and **in school**. There is great concern that without universal masking we will have more students and staff out of the classroom more often as close contacts are required to quarantine when covid cases arise. We are weighing the impact to the community as a whole if Covid spreads within our schools. Regardless of our beliefs or opinions, positive cases and close contacts will still be subject to Public Health quarantine rules; we don't get to make or break the rules. If our learning is disrupted due to decreased mitigation strategies and rising case counts, protocols will be revisited.

A formal presentation and recommendation will be provided to the board during the meeting on Tuesday, August 10. You are encouraged to provide comments and suggestions prior to the meeting via email to exec@pcsd.us (Mara Lutomski). All emails will be forwarded to school board members. You are also welcome to provide feedback during the school board meeting during "Comments Related to Agenda Items." Please use this link [Ring Central Meeting Link](#) to attend the meeting virtually August 10th at 6:00 pm; Password: Viking. A detailed plan will be released after the board meeting discussion on August 10th, with an opportunity for additional feedback before finalizing.

Thank you all for your patience throughout this process. As you know, there are multiple voices to be heard and multiple considerations to be made to create the safest and least disruptive learning environment possible.

Respectfully,
Erica Kludt-Painter, Superintendent