



# Highlands School District

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July 13, 2020

Dear Highlands Families,

I hope this letter finds you well and healthy. As everyone is very aware, COVID-19 continues to present challenges to our normal routines and activities. As we get closer to the start of the school year, we are anticipating many questions from our families. The Highlands Task Force for Reopening School has been working hard behind the scenes to develop the Health and Safety Plan. This plan will allow our students to return to some sense of normalcy, while keeping our school community healthy and safe. The Task Force is comprised of 47 members, including administrators, teachers, secretaries, paraprofessionals, custodians, food-service workers, transportation representatives, school police officers, school board members, parents and medical experts. This has not been an easy task for this group of dedicated people, and they continue to work diligently on a return to school plan that aligns with the requirements set forth in the Health and Safety Plan, CDC guidelines and the Governor's orders.

There are several things that we all need to keep in mind during the next few months. The first is that conditions are constantly changing, and we will be adapting our plans accordingly. It is just as important to remember that although each of us has different opinions related to the COVID circumstances, the school district is charged with creating a Plan that adheres to the guidelines and restrictions set forth by PDE, CDC, and the Allegheny County Health Department. We recognize the importance of ensuring that our families have updated information, so we will be posting regular updates on our website. I strongly encourage you to visit the Task Force for Reopening page frequently for the most current information.

Here is an overview of our planning for reopening this fall to date as well as our next steps:

- Since March, Allegheny County Superintendents have had twice weekly meetings to review and discuss the latest recommendations from various public health organizations including the Center for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and county health departments. During the past month, representatives from the Allegheny County Health Department have joined these meetings to provide updates and answer questions.
- Based on these recommendations, the district has created plans to restart athletics. The plans have been approved by the school board and practices will resume on July 13. Social distancing guidelines and the Governor's most recent order requiring all Pennsylvanians over the age of 2 to wear masks, will be followed. We will continue to monitor conditions in the county and tweak the plans as needed.

- The Task Force for Reopening has been meeting frequently to develop the Health and Safety Plan that must be board approved and submitted to PDE. This plan will be posted on the district website once it is approved.
- On July 28, the school board will vote on the first draft of our School Reopening Plan. This plan does two things: communicates our intent to pursue a hybrid model for reopening in August and provides an overview of the precautions and procedures that will be in place.

*It is important to note that this plan will likely change as new guidelines and recommendations are released.*

More detailed plans are also being developed internally by the Task Force and its subcommittees.

At this time, we are planning a **hybrid model for reopening** that will involve two days of in-person learning at school and three days of learning remotely each week. Due to the restrictions the district must abide by in the Plan, the Task Force determined this to be the most appropriate model to allow students to return to school, while adhering to the guidelines of the Health and Safety Plan. The most difficult barriers that resulted in the decision for the hybrid model were the mandate that all students age 2 and older must wear masks, 6 feet distance must be maintained in the classrooms and other areas, the quarantine guidelines, substitute shortages, cleaning and disinfecting needs, and transportation restrictions. We know this is not an ideal situation, and our goal is to return all students to school full time at the start of the second semester, if not sooner. It is important to note that the remote learning days will involve daily teacher-led instruction and synchronous learning. Parents will not be expected to be the teacher for their children. Students will be expected to participate in remote instruction, along with completing the required work assigned. Student attendance will be required and recorded on each remote learning day. In addition, grading expectations will return to what they were prior to the COVID school closure. The administration and teaching staff are working hard to prepare a hybrid model that is rigorous and aligns to the curriculum standards set forth by PDE. As stated earlier, this is the tentative plan for reopening Highlands Schools in the fall and most likely will be revised based on the ever-changing information and circumstances of COVID. However, the Task Force felt it was critical to get this information out to families, to allow them to make the necessary childcare arrangements. After the Health and Safety Plan is officially approved, the administration will provide families with more details related to the specific days your children will attend school. We will also work with those families who have multiple children to assure they have the same schedule, if so desired.

I encourage all families with young children to have alternate plans in place in the event of an unexpected school building closure or if your child would need to be quarantined. If your child has close contact with a person with a confirmed case of COVID-19, the Allegheny County Health Department will most likely order a 14-day quarantine. During the 14-day quarantine period, your child will not be allowed to attend school, but will continue learning with the remote learning platform.

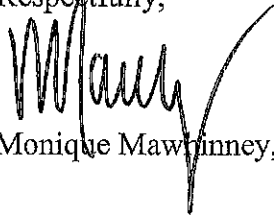
The district will offer a **full virtual learning option to all** families with children who cannot return to any in-person schooling in the fall. Students who choose to work virtually will be able to participate in the *Highlands Virtual Academy* that is available for students in grades K-12. In addition to the secondary virtual program we have available, we will now offer an elementary

virtual program. *Attending the Highlands Virtual Academy will allow students to make an easy transition back to in-person schooling when appropriate.* Your child will be assigned a Highlands teacher, who will keep them connected to the district, so that they continue to be a part of our school family. In early August, families will be able to sign up on the district website for the Highlands Virtual Academy.

While there are many unknowns, we do know that during the next few months we will face challenges the likes of which we have never encountered. I want our families to know we are working diligently and in consultation with health experts in an effort to do all we can to provide a safe environment for our students and staff. We recognize that anxiety levels will be high, and I encourage all of our families to reach out to us directly with any questions or concerns. I am confident that we can successfully meet this challenge by working together and supporting each other throughout the process. I believe that by doing this, our children will be the ones who truly benefit from having our community working together to ensure their well-being.

On behalf of the Task Force for Reopening Schools, I thank you for your understanding and cooperation as we continue to develop the Health and Safety Plan for our students and staff.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Monique Mawhinney', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Monique Mawhinney, Ed. D.