Shrewsbury Public Schools
COVID-19 Mitigation Protocols
2021-2022 School Year

Message from the Superintendent

August 18, 2021

Dear Shrewsbury Families, Colleagues, & Community Members,

Our school district has been diligently preparing for the new 2021-2022 school year with great anticipation. With the return to full-time, in-person learning, the opening of the new Beal School, and the financial resources provided by the successful town operational override vote last spring, there is much to be excited about! At the same time, the increase in COVID-19 cases in Shrewsbury over the past month and the uncertainty of how the more contagious Delta variant may impact our community are a reminder that the Coronavirus pandemic is not yet over, and we must continue to be prudent in our approach in order to prioritize the health and safety of all members of our school community.

After consultation with medical and public health experts; consideration of recommendations from authoritative state and national medical, public health, and educational sources; careful review of the feedback submitted by families and staff through online exchanges; and thoughtful consideration of how to balance the risks associated with both COVID-19 with the social, emotional, and academic benefits of a return to a more "normal" school experience, our district leaders and principals have come to consensus regarding the recommendations for the school operational protocols contained in this document. Key recommendations include:

1) A strong emphasis on providing and maintaining full-time, in-person learning for students with minimal disruptions
2) Beginning the school year with a requirement that all students, staff, and visitors wear a mask regardless of vaccination status, and frequently re-evaluating this approach in light of updated local and state COVID-19 data along with medical and public health recommendations
3) Continued implementation of strong ventilation and hand hygiene throughout school buildings

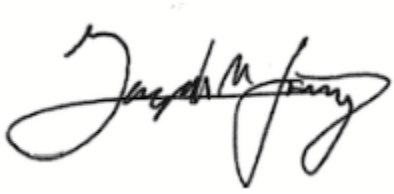
4) A return to typical classroom instructional configurations, including desk arrangements for small group work

5) A return to typical lunch and recess procedures

The approach outlined in this document is designed to provide school environments where all students experience the benefits of attending school with their peers in person. The American Academy of Pediatricians (AAP), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) are in strong agreement that the social, emotional, mental health, and educational benefits of in-person school outweigh the limited risks of COVID-19 infections occurring in the school setting, and that these risks can be successfully mitigated through layers of sensible prevention methods.

I recommend that the Shrewsbury School Committee endorse the following protocols for the opening of the 2021-2022 school year.

Respectfully,



Joseph M. Sawyer, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

2021 School Opening Protocols

Full-Time, In-Person Education

Per the state Department of Elementary & Secondary Education's requirements, and aligned with the recommendations of authoritative public health, medical, and educational organizations, the Shrewsbury Public Schools will provide full-time, in-person education for all students. A remote schooling option will not be provided; remote schooling is not legally permitted for public school attendance for this school year per the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Students who miss school due to illness or quarantine will be provided with reasonable opportunities to keep up with and/or make up academic work, per existing school policies. The school district will follow its usual approach in supporting students who must miss school for a significant, extended period of time (more than 14 days) due to a serious illness. Families who choose not to send their child to in-person public school in Shrewsbury must either homeschool their child, enroll their child in an approved Commonwealth Virtual School, or enroll them in an approved private school.

Masking

At the start of the school year, all students, staff, and visitors in all schools will be required to wear a mask indoors, regardless of vaccination status. Masks are not required for any outdoor activities.

This requirement is based upon the current recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatricians, the CDC, and local public health officials, due to the documented efficacy of masking to limit risk of transmission of the virus, the emerging concerns regarding the contagiousness of the Delta variant, and the finding that vaccinated individuals can unknowingly transmit the virus.

Masks must be worn on buses per federal transportation mandate. Masks will be removed when eating and drinking, and we will continue our approach from last spring where mask breaks will be provided according to the age and needs of students. Only individuals with a documented and district-approved medical exemption, or whose disability prevents them from wearing a mask will be exempted from the masking requirement.

While the joint recommendation of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is for requirement of universal masking of unvaccinated individuals with optional masking for vaccinated individuals, this approach creates a higher level of risk for students being excluded from school as close contacts when an individual is found to be positive for COVID-19. This will help maintain attendance without interruption, which is a key goal for all students. Additionally, determining whether or not a student is vaccinated and required to wear a mask would add significant complexity to the day-to-day management of almost 3,000 students at Oak Middle School and Shrewsbury High School that would detract from our focus on a smooth, positive opening of the school year.

This requirement will be reviewed on an ongoing basis in light of community and school data, including COVID-19 cases and test positivity rates, along with medical and public health recommendations, with the intention that the masking requirement can be relaxed at a future point. Given the negative experiences that school districts who have already begun school are having elsewhere in the U.S. where masking is optional, we believe this is a prudent approach to start the school year. Last year, our students and staff adapted extremely well to the masking requirement, and we expect that to continue as we open the new school year.

Physical Distancing

The Department of Elementary & Secondary Education has removed any mandates regarding physical distancing, and strict physical distancing between students will not be required. The CDC guideline of maintaining at least three feet of distancing where possible will be followed. In order to provide a more normalized school experience, there will be times when distance between students will be less than three feet. This is due to the importance of flexibility for instructional seating arrangements for small group work, the social emotional importance of a more normal lunch experience, and the ability to utilize gymnasiums for physical education and activity.

Teachers will be required to maintain seating charts for classroom seating in order to assist if/when contact tracing is necessary. Students will eat at tables in the cafeteria and will be required to sit with the same group of students at lunch, with seating documented, in order to mitigate the number of close contacts when eating and

facilitate contact tracing if/when necessary. Seating arrangements may be changed periodically.

When weather permits, utilizing the outdoors for mask breaks, snack breaks, etc. is encouraged.

Quarantine and Close Contacts

The district will follow the state requirements for quarantining of individuals who test positive or who are deemed to be a close contact of a positive individual, as described in detail at https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/on-desktop/protocols/protocols.pdf. This includes the following guidelines:

- An individual who is diagnosed with COVID-19 must quarantine for 10 days from the onset of symptoms (or positive test if asymptomatic). They may return to school after 10 days without a fever and other symptoms have sufficiently resolved
- A close contact remains defined as either someone who is within six feet of a positive individual for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more in one day. However, the following are exempted from being defined as a close contact for testing and quarantining protocols:
    - Individuals who are fully vaccinated and asymptomatic
    - Classroom close contacts where both individuals were masked and at least three feet apart
    - Bus close contacts where all individuals are masked and windows open
    - Individuals who have had COVID-19 in the past 90 days and are asymptomatic
- Close contacts who are asymptomatic but not vaccinated may continue to attend school if they participate in the “Test and Stay” protocol, where individuals are tested daily for seven days from date of exposure using a rapid antigen test at school, and may stay at school if they test negative.

- Close contacts who are asymptomatic but not vaccinated and who do not participate in “Test and Stay” will need to remain home on quarantine for at least seven days (returning on the eighth day if they have a negative COVID test and no symptoms; if no test, returning on the eleventh day if no symptoms
- Any individual who is symptomatic, whether vaccinated or not, and who is not a close contact must remain out of school while they have symptoms, but may return if they receive a negative COVID test, is given an alternative diagnosis by a health professional, have improvement of symptoms, and is fever-free for 24 hours

Ventilation

Ventilation is one of the important layers of mitigation to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The district, in collaboration with the Public Buildings Division, will continue its enhanced ventilation practices that were in place last year. This includes maximizing fresh air exchange through HVAC systems that meet or exceed air turnover standards; opening windows wherever possible; and providing air purifiers for occupied spaces without windows. We are seeking updated guidance regarding the use of fans and will determine whether the no fan policy will be updated.

Routine COVID Safety Checks (Surveillance Testing)

The district plans to again provide pooled surveillance testing for students and staff in order to identify asymptomatic infections and to help monitor the potential presence of COVID-19 among the school population. Last year this created peace of mind for many. Participation in this testing is optional in all cases but is encouraged, especially for non-vaccinated individuals. The district plans to utilize the free testing program being provided by DESE and is awaiting details from the state before proceeding.

Hand Hygiene

Hand hygiene and hand washing will continue to be emphasized, and hand sanitizer will be readily available in classrooms and other locations throughout the school.

Cleaning

The district will follow CDC guidance for one routine daily cleaning. Cleaning supplies for additional cleaning will be available for classrooms, but multiple cleanings throughout the day is not necessary or recommended by CDC. If there is a positive case, spaces that the individual has occupied will undergo a thorough cleaning. Additional personnel will be assigned by the Public Buildings Department to ensure lunch tables are cleaned in between lunch seatings.

School Events

We expect to hold school events, with masking if the event is indoors. Events that typically have larger audiences may be modified.

Visitors/Volunteers

Visitors will be allowed in buildings, subject to the mask requirement indoors. Volunteers will also be allowed; given that this is an unusual transition year, it is likely teachers will establish classroom routines before inviting classroom volunteers to come in – patience is appreciated.

Music Ensembles

Chorus, band, and orchestra classes will be held with modifications as warranted based upon guidelines such as those recently issued by the Massachusetts Music Educators Association, which include masking indoors, using instrument bell covers, etc.

Athletics

Interscholastic athletics will be held and will follow Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association (MIAA) guidelines.

Conclusion

The opening of the 2021-2022 school year represents an important transition for our students, families, and staff. The district remains committed to the health, safety, and well-being of all as our top priority, and it is noteworthy that both families and staff identified mental health and social emotional needs as extremely important to address as we return to school. The protocols above seek to balance the risks associated with potential transmission of COVID-19 with the critical importance of providing an in-person school experience where students and staff may build personal connections and social bonds that are crucial for well-being. I am confident that our schools will rise to the challenges ahead and continue to adapt as necessary to serve our students, families, and colleagues well.