



## Comprehensive Return-to-School Update

July 10, 2020

Greetings to Pine-Richland Students, Staff, Parents and the Community,

We hope that everyone is enjoying the summer. **COVID-19 has continued to impact most aspects of life in the United States and across the world.** The reopening of the economy and easing of some health precautions have contributed to increases in confirmed cases of the disease. In Allegheny County, health department officials have expressed concern over the rapid increase in daily cases in the county. The healthcare system in Pittsburgh has the capacity to handle increases in cases at this time. Given the increases, however, the tracing process for close contacts of confirmed COVID-19 cases has been difficult for Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) to manage. As we get closer to the start of the 2020 – 2021 school year, we wanted to provide a progress update and share information about next steps.



### Important Disclaimer

One of the most challenging parts of this situation is the constantly evolving nature of information and guidance. Healthcare experts have learned much during the past five months. As the knowledge base expands, it requires all of us to demonstrate agility in thinking and planning. The speed of change makes it difficult to plan ahead. As a result, plans must remain flexible to those changing conditions. **This update contains our best thinking at this time.** There are many questions that do not yet have answers. While we understand the frustrations associated with this new reality, it is also important to adapt plans as needed. We continue to monitor information from ACHD, Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), Pennsylvania Department of Health (PADOH), American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). These agencies support plans for in-person instruction for 2020 – 2021.

### Preliminary Survey Results

In mid-June, we administered a preliminary survey to parents and staff. We had 2,960 parents respond to the survey balanced across all grade levels. Results include the following:

- Parents Preferring Traditional In-Person (81.41%)
- Parents Preferring Virtual (9.74%)
- Parents Not Sure (8.85%)
- Parents Willing to Provide Transportation (61%)

On the staff survey, the top concerns for return-to-school plans of teachers included: (1) Logistics of unstructured or high population areas; (2) Individual student interactions/support; (3) Concern over whether the health and safety plan will be effective; (4) Cleanliness of rooms and equipment; and (5) Managing the classroom instruction with new health protocols.

### Return-to-School Planning Update

We have focused on continuous and significant efforts in planning for the fall. Health agencies at the local, state and national levels encourage a return-to-school with precautions. The PRSD Healthcare Leadership Council is one of the groups that provides oversight and input in the planning. Comprised of 43 members, this council has already held three meetings with additional meetings planned for next month. We have 12 members that are part of the Pine-Richland community – residents and parents – who also serve as subject matter experts in healthcare fields. The complete list of PRSD Healthcare Leadership Council members is available on our COVID-19 website.

Also, the superintendents of all Allegheny County school districts – in conjunction with staff at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit – have held weekly calls with representatives of the Allegheny County Health Department. The frequency of these calls has allowed school district officials to gather specific feedback about return-to-school plans. The school districts in the northern portion of Allegheny County are also meeting on a regular basis to share plans. All school districts in the county are planning for some form of in-person instruction at this time.

**At Pine-Richland, we are preparing for a traditional in-person start for 2020 – 2021 and a 100% virtual option available for families seeking that model.** In addition, we anticipate that we will experience increased absenteeism this year for multiple reasons. First, it will be critical for everyone's health that students or staff members stay home if they are feeling sick. It is our experience that people sometimes try to "tough it out" if they are not feeling well. It will be really important for students and staff to stay home if sick. Second, it is likely that students or staff may be required to quarantine at home for 14 days if they are in close contact with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19. ACHD conducts contact tracing as part of the protocols to reduce risk and slow the spread of the disease. Even if a student or staff member does not contract the virus himself or herself, ACHD may require quarantine. **The point of this example is to illustrate that students and staff may need to shift between a traditional in-person and virtual model as situations develop.**

## Home-to-School-to-Home

The goal of our planning efforts is not just to “re-open” but to “stay open.” There are certain fundamental behaviors and precautions that increase that goal: (1) symptom/temperature checks at home; (2) stay home if sick; (3) correct and frequent hand washing; (4) coughing/sneezing into elbow followed by washing/cleaning; (5) maintain physical distancing to the extent possible; (6) eliminate or limit touching of the face and others; (7) eliminate or limit sharing of equipment and ensure appropriate cleaning; and (8) wear appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

The recent order by Governor Wolf and PDE regarding [face coverings](#) is important to understand. Face coverings include any type of synthetic or natural fiber (scarfs, bandanas, etc.) or plastic face shields that cover the nose and mouth. These **face coverings are required for staff and students** and are especially important in dynamic social environments like schools when physical distancing is a challenge. These fundamentals will be critical to the overall plan for traditional in-person instruction.

The PRSD Health and Safety Plan is being finalized and a draft of the plan will be posted on the PRSD website by Tuesday, July 14<sup>th</sup>. That plan will continue to be revised and prepared for school board action on August 3<sup>rd</sup>. It will be submitted to PDE and posted on the PRSD COVID-19 website. It is important to note that all plans will be dynamic and flexible. As new health-related information and guidance is released, it is likely that the PRSD school board will be asked to consider updates to the plan at future meetings. **Areas addressed in the plan will include:** “At Home” Requirements (Symptom Check and Temperature); Hygiene Fundamentals; Bus Riders/Bus Procedures and Parent Drop-off Procedures; Building Cleaning and Sanitizing; Ventilation/HVAC; PPE; Entry to School and Homeroom Check; Classrooms (General); Classrooms (Special Education); Classrooms (Special Areas); Health Office; Restrooms; Transition Between Classes; Cafeteria; Visitors and External Groups; Athletics and Activities; Communication; and Mental Health Supports. **We are committed to a plan that addresses all aspects of the school day from “home-to-school-to-home.”** Attention to these details by each person will be critical to a sustainable approach.

As one example of a district action to support traditional in-person instruction, the board recently approved a \$250,000 expenditure to purchase a large quantity of voice amplification systems for our staff. Staff members will wear a microphone “necklace” that works in conjunction with a speaker. This system allows the staff member to use a regular speaking voice and still be heard very clearly by all students. This technology works with both a face covering or a face shield. This type of investment also helps promote the physical distancing necessary in the classroom setting. Hand sanitizer units have also been installed in every classroom space and in common areas. These are just two examples of the preparations underway in our schools.

## Virtual Option

In recent days, we have shifted planning to the virtual option. We know that some families will want this option as an educational choice. The approach to virtual instruction will be different than the routine established this past spring. We are working to increase the degree of direct instruction and balanced use of synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (different time) experiences. We are working to streamline the use of technology platforms and tools to increase consistency and still offer developmentally-appropriate options. Importantly, there will be specific requirements for attendance, engagement, assignment completion, assessment and grading that are more stringent than the spring. Whether in-person or virtual, the regular grading systems will be implemented at all grade levels.

As mentioned earlier, we also know that some students – and staff – may need to shift from “traditional in-person” to “virtual” for days/weeks based on health circumstances. For example, a student that is quarantined from traditional in-person instruction for 14 days will need to continue his or her education at home through a virtual program before being granted permission to return to school. In conjunction with our technology department, teacher representatives and building level technology coach representatives, we are working to develop an approach that manages both. Each potential solution will have advantages and disadvantages.

## Upcoming Survey

A second survey for parents and staff will be distributed by Friday, July 17<sup>th</sup> for completion by Friday, July 24<sup>th</sup>. This survey will contain more detailed questions. It will also require specific information about individual students and staff so that we can refine planning. We need 100% participation with this survey so that we have a very clear picture of the return-to-school plan. For example, we will need to know exactly how many students will be assigned to a particular bus. If a third-grade teacher has 23 students assigned to a roster, we need to know with a degree of certainty that 17 students are planning for traditional in-person instruction and 6 students are planning for virtual instruction.

## Athletics and Activities

At the end of June, the first version of the Health and Safety Plan for Athletics and Activities was approved. Phase 1 has started for varsity sports. It is important to note that this plan will continue to evolve as conditions change. We do not know how the fall will develop. It is possible that regular competition between schools may be reduced or eliminated. It is possible that competitions will occur without spectators or with significant restrictions. We will likely live stream more events and/or hold some events/activities virtually for the foreseeable future. It would be premature to speculate at this time. However, we are pleased to see students return to activities and follow the required health and safety guidelines. It is our goal to “stay open” by paying attention to these details.

## Final Thoughts and Next Steps

We know that this update has a lot of information. Please continue to review new information added to the PRSD COVID-19 website. The draft Health and Safety Plan will be posted by Tuesday, July 14<sup>th</sup>. It is important to note that this is a work-in-progress. The draft will be completed by late July for board action on August 3<sup>rd</sup> and submission to the Pennsylvania Department of Education. As stated earlier, we expect to make ongoing revisions to the plan as new information emerges and our experience increases.

Respectfully,

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**COVID-19 & Continuity of Learning  
Website**

