

Memo: Board of Education
Administration
From: Bob Szymoniak
Date: December 14, 2020
RE: COVID-19 School Closure Decision-making

There are basically five things we weigh when deciding on school closures due to the pandemic. It is not perfect, but we are doing the best we can to keep school open while keeping students and staff safe. What follows are those five things with an explanation for each on where circumstances stand as of December 9, 2020.

1. Health Professionals Recommendations

There are two main health professionals that we look to for guidance during this pandemic. Public Health-Muskegon County director Kathy Moore advises school districts based on local COVID-19 positivity data and availability of Mercy Health Hospital's capacity to manage COVID-19 patients. During a recent meeting with her the week of November 30, 2020, Ms. Moore shared that our data is stabilizing. While she admitted that our positivity rate of 17% on December 3 was still very high, it appears to be trending downward from a high of 24% on November 23. She therefore informed county superintendents that she felt students could return to school. In fact she indicated that school is one of the safest places for our students to be.

Dr. Grill is the Chief Medical Officer for Mercy Health and he also joins our superintendent meetings to offer his guidance. He said this in an email to county superintendents on December 3: "...we need to balance making decisions in real time, with real life data, as well as what we theorize might occur. If you layer on top of that the fact that (in our county in particular) kids in school means better access to meals, easier access to the critical learning for those with more difficult access to electronic media, the fact that our schools' safety plans worked tremendously well leading up to this current spike I do believe that it is not unreasonable to go back to school."

In summary, the health professionals we are relying on for guidance have both indicated that students could return to the classroom.

2. Consideration of What Other Districts Are Doing

One would think that county health departments would play a large role in determining whether schools should remain open during this pandemic. Unfortunately that is not consistently the case state-wide. For example, in Ottawa County, the Ottawa ISD superintendent reported that his districts did not want the health department to make collective decisions for all the districts in the county...they wanted local autonomy to

decide whether to close schools themselves. This is evidenced by Spring Lake returning to face to face learning while their neighbor Grand Haven decided to go remote. In Kent County, the health department has been more engaged with schools, but they are only making recommendations, not mandates. They have recommended that high schools remain closed through to the middle of January. All remaining K-8 schools can stay open, depending upon local conditions and circumstances.

In Muskegon County, the health department has told us they will not close schools, but will help with the decision making as I previously mentioned above.

As of December 9, 2020, the following local school districts will have some semblance of face to face education going into Christmas break:

Spring Lake	Coopersville
Montague	Mona Shores
Ravenna	Orchard View
Oakridge	Whitehall
Reeths-Puffer	

The only local schools not having face to face learning going into Christmas break are Muskegon and Muskegon Heights who have both been remote all fall, Grand Haven, North Muskegon, and Holton.

Therefore, nearly all of our neighboring schools are having face to face learning prior to Christmas Break.

3. Ability to Staff Buildings and Buses

As of December 9, 2020, only two teachers will be off for COVID-19 related matters. In transportation, our transportation director Kathy Randall tells me that she will be able to staff all routes at this point. Therefore, we do not have staffing implications that would cause us to consider closing. Please note that this was a big part of deciding to go remote on November 23 as we had many staff out for COVID-19 related reasons to where we really couldn't effectively manage our buildings and transport kids home.

Therefore, we are currently able to staff our district so that we can have face to face learning.

4. The Number of Cases We are Dealing with as a District

As of December 6, Fruitport has had 75 staff/students that tested positive for COVID-19 and needed to isolate. In addition, we have had 364 staff/students that needed to be

quarantined due to a direct exposure to COVID-19. In looking at positive cases over time beginning with October 8, there is a mostly even weekly distribution of cases with at least one case reported every week. The most reported cases in a week were 5 on November 19. It was because of that high number, the amount of contact tracing that led to many quarantines, and the number of staff out for COVID-19 related reasons that we, again, decided to go remote through the Thanksgiving holiday.

Note that the high school has had the most positive cases at 29. The next closest building is Shettler at 12. Because it is clear that high schools are more prone to positive COVID-19 cases than are elementary or middle schools, MDHHS has closed high schools.

To date, I am aware of only one transmission of COVID-19 that occurred at school. That transmission was student to student. We are finding parents to be mostly very responsible in keeping students home in the event there was a suspected exposure to a positive case, or if there are any symptoms within the home as well. This is evidence that our mitigation strategies are working. In fact, our mask mandate has been more successful than anyone thought possible. This is important because I recently heard a national health expert say that he felt masks would be more effective in defeating COVID-19 than would a vaccine.

Therefore, with no student to teacher transmissions of COVID-19 in our district, if we maintain our mitigation efforts, all evidence suggests we can keep schools open.

5. CDC Guidance

Recently the CDC changed guidance on the length of time a person needs to be quarantined from a direct exposure to COVID-19 from 14 to 7-10 days. They have found that after a direct exposure, if a person were to become sick from COVID-19, it would likely happen in the 7 to 10 day range.

We anticipated a spike of cases after Thanksgiving. There have been 13 days (as of the time of this typing) since Thanksgiving. With the new quarantine range the CDC has recommended, that spike should have hit us by now. That said, I understand that there is a lag in data collection, testing, etc. But if we look at hospitalizations at Mercy Health, we are being told that the numbers continue to stabilize. Therefore, it is not likely we will have that anticipated post-Thanksgiving spike, even if we stay with the original 14 day guidance for quarantine.

6. Summary

The information we use to decide whether to close schools and go to remote learning, as of today, supports keeping our buildings that house K-8 students open. It appears that

our families exercised the necessary restraint and followed COVID-19 mitigation strategies over Thanksgiving to keep our county from seeing a COVID-19 spike. That said, Christmas and New Years are two of the most important holidays for friend and family gatherings. We do not know if people will show the restraint necessary to keep us from seeing a COVID-19 spike in early January. Therefore, as an overabundance of caution, I suggest we go to remote learning K-12 upon returning to school on January 4 for that week. We will be monitoring local data during break and will communicate as soon as possible when and how schools reopen in January of 2021.