

# STONINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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**To:** Stonington Community

**From:** Dr. Van Riley, Superintendent 

**Date:** February 2, 2021

**Subject:** COVID-19 Update

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I would like nothing more than to have every child back in classrooms with our teachers with all the recommended safety precautions in place. I understand the pressures the current hybrid instructional model is placing on our families, students, and staff members. The hybrid instructional model currently employed by Stonington Public Schools has been successful in retaining as many students in-person as possible for the longest period of time. Thus far, the interruptions resulting in cohorts of students pivoting to a full distance learning model have been due primarily to contact tracing situations because of athletics. Only inclement weather and pre-emptive measures to assess return readiness after vacations have resulted in a full-district pivot to distance learning for all students.

We have received questions about when and how we will be able to reopen our schools to students on a full-time, in-person basis. Some of these questions stem from practices within surrounding districts and local private schools. Smaller districts/schools with lower enrollment than Stonington may have the space and staff to adhere to the social distancing requirements and other mitigation strategies necessary to follow the Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines with a full in-person model. I cannot speak for other districts or schools and their criteria for returning to a fully in-person model. I can only reiterate our commitment to student and staff safety and highlight our success in keeping the doors open since September with the hybrid model.

Other questions have resulted from headlines in various media sources calling for the “reopening” of schools across the nation and within the state. Our schools are open and have been open since September. These headlines and soundbites are usually referring to districts that have been fully remote since last March and have recently returned or are attempting to return to a hybrid model.

It is important for our community to know our intent is to open schools as soon as it is deemed safe to do so. There are many issues that need to be considered in making the decision on how and when to reopen. One of the issues is having teachers and staff members available for in-school learning. We are averaging over 30 teacher/staff absences every day. Staff are required to follow the mandated quarantine requirements which contributes to these unanticipated absences. We, like all other districts, struggle finding qualified substitute teachers, nurses, and support staff. We have doubled our efforts in the hiring of qualified substitutes.

In order to reopen fully in-person now we would continue to follow the CDC, CT Department of Public Health (DPH), and local health department guidelines. This includes the requirement of a minimum of six feet social-distancing, use of masks, and providing proper ventilation. For us to open with the distancing requirement, we could only have 12-13 students in a classroom. This would require us to split current hybrid classes and move some classrooms to other off-site facilities or use gyms, cafeterias, music rooms, libraries or other specialty areas. Teacher assignments and instructional locations would have to change for many students. The continuity students have enjoyed for the first six months of the school year would be disrupted. We would also need to hire many more qualified teachers and furnish new classroom spaces with materials and equipment which is simply not possible or practical mid-year.

This situation remains a dynamic one. With the new variant now being identified within the state, it is premature to change the instructional model and put students and staff at risk when the public health community supports the current model. Our best course is to proceed with the current model as we await for vaccines to become available for staff and students.

In summary, we are beginning to plan for the fall with the intent to offer in-school options for all students that meet CDC and DPH guidelines. If we are able to open full time sooner and can assure families and staff that we are following all safety protocols, we will certainly move in that direction.