

# MT. BLUE REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

CHESTERVILLE – FARMINGTON – INDUSTRY – NEW SHARON – NEW VINEYARD – STARKS – TEMPLE – VIENNA – WELD – WILTON  
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*“Public Schools not only serve the public, they make the public.”*

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TO: RSU 9 Parents & Guardians  
FROM: Christian M. Elkington, Superintendent  
RE: Updates and FYIs!  
DATE: 8-27-2021

Each of us had hoped that by the end of this summer COVID would be well back in our rear view mirror. As we all know these hopes have been largely dashed by the ongoing COVID variant spread. Even though Maine has one of the best vaccination rates in the country combined with the multiple mitigation efforts made by so many over the previous weeks and months, we have not been able to stop the spread of this new variant in our communities. This new spread has unfortunately caused some people to continue to question science and medicine and raised emotions which in some districts have spilled out in meetings causing disrespectful, unproductive interactions. I am thankful that in RSU 9 we have not experienced such extremes. There are many factors which have helped cause the new spread including the variant itself, the relaxing of some previous protections, human nature along with the need for us to be able to interact with our family, friends, neighbors and co-workers. Because of this, we are back to dealing with how to reopen schools in the face of growing COVID-related difficulties and concerns.

As you should expect from your superintendent, I take very, very seriously the legal mandate of *In Loco Parentis* which dictates that teachers and administrators act “in the place of the parent” when students are under their supervision in the school. This responsibility factors heavily into my reviewing and helping to set school health and safety expectations. We have closely monitored the evolving health situation the last two months and with the best information available I advised our school board to follow the guidance from the US CDC, Maine CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), in regards to universal masking inside our schools. This past Tuesday, our school board voted to mandate indoor universal masking for grades 9-12 students and staff. Combined with the previously approved recommendation regarding masking indoors for grades PreK-8, students and staff in all our schools and in all grades will be required to wear masks indoors.

Please know that I did not make this recommendation lightly as I understand and appreciate some of the concerns raised by those who question the need for universal masking. My recommendation was based on what I believe is the best way at this time to:

- Open our schools!
- Keep our schools open every day!
- Keep our kids and our staff safe and in school every day!
- Not put families in the difficult position of having to decide whether to send their children to school or not based on variant spread!
- Reduce the frequency with which our nurses have to call families to pick up their kids because your child has to quarantine!
- Allow our families to go to work with less worry about a call or for the possibility of us going hybrid again!

**AS WE MOVE FORWARD – What has changed?**

We can take solace in the fact that some factors have changed since we began the 2020-2021 School Year:

- Immunizations are available for people twelve and older and hopefully vaccinations will soon be approved for our youngest students.
- We have lots of evidence that in Mt. Blue, and elsewhere, that by following Maine CDC guidance throughout the previous school year we had a reduced need for students and staff to quarantine as compared to several of our surrounding districts and those of our sports competitors.
- From a teaching and learning perspective there are many important differences from last year to today:
  - o In-person learning is a priority for our students.
  - o All students will be able to be in school every day.
  - o We no longer need to require masks for anyone while outdoors.
  - o Because of the reduction in social distancing requirements (3 feet where applicable) we are able to go back to many of the best practices in our classrooms including small group learning and engaging activities to promote the social-emotional welfare of your children. Spacing considerations will not be used to limit student interactions with their potential learning opportunities.
  - o Students will be fully involved in music, drama and sports this year from day one (subject to changing public health conditions and MPA guidance) and are now doing so.
  - o Students can play and work with peers in their grade level from other classes.
  - o We will be slowly re-establishing opportunities for field trips, starting with Grades 9-12 in September and then based on future conditions will hopefully expand opportunities to Grades K-8 by the middle of October.
  - o School buildings will be available for some evening meetings, events and recreational activities as long as we have staffing to clean and sanitize and as long as any group using our facilities follows our universal masking requirements.

#### **Further precautions:**

- Visitors will be allowed into our schools for curriculum purposes only w/Building Principal permission.
- Volunteers will not be allowed into our schools for the first couple of months, but this decision will be reexamined in November to determine if volunteers can be safely allowed into our schools.
- Advanced hygiene practices will continue to be emphasized including increased hand washing/sanitizing, extra cleaning of high-touch/traffic areas, and continued proper hygiene education.
- Increased fresh air will be added to classrooms where applicable to both pull air in from the outside and force air out to the outside as allowed under US CDC Recommendations.
- Our cafeterias and other large school spaces will be used, but not to capacity, as we will expect when applicable up to 3ft distancing and will maintain at least 9 cubic feet of space/air for each person using the space.

#### **IMPORTANT FYIs**

**Our staffing shortages continue** – With progress in filling positions slowing the last two weeks. This is not just a “this year” concern, but has been a problem in RSU 9 over several previous years. We will be trying a differing advertising strategy in the coming weeks with hopes of filling as many of our needs as possible with both full and part-time options. We are also looking at offering RSU 9 staff who now work less than 40 hrs. per week extra time, in available open positions either at their school or within other RSU 9 facilities. You have my word that we will work on this both in the short and long-term!

**Filming of this past board meeting (8/24/21) during and after the Executive Session** – Was interrupted because of a lack of coordination on my part with the running of the live feed in coordination with the Executive Session. No actions were taken by the Board that were not recorded except as related to extending the time of the meeting and adjournment.

**Below is some information on the impact masks have in schools:**

- Federal CDC Guidance for Schools: <https://bit.ly/3i3SP9c> Updated on August 5<sup>th</sup> includes a strong recommendation for all schools to universally mask as a result of the Delta Variant.
- AAA (American Academy of Pediatrics): <https://bit.ly/3seYKM7> “AAP recommends universal masking because a significant portion of the student population is not yet eligible for vaccines, and masking is proven to reduce transmission of the virus and to protect those who are not vaccinated.”
- American Medical Association: “The AMA strongly supports the scientifically driven changes... ‘With cases of COVID-19 continuing to increase in the United States and a significant number of people who remain unvaccinated, the CDC’s updated mask guidance is needed to help curb the spread of COVID-19—particularly the Delta variant, which we know is much more contagious.’” <https://bit.ly/3Dl2h0t>
- Effectiveness of Masks: In addition to the support of masks from all major medical organizations in the US the following peer reviewed article was shared with me: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2776536> I have also reviewed several other articles from trustworthy organizations like the American Lung Association: <https://www.lung.org/blog/covid-masks>
- Yesterday, this [article from the BDN](https://bit.ly/3sNOOcZ) (<https://bit.ly/3sNOOcZ>) was sent to me sharing the experience from the County, further proving the need for masks so we can do our best to avoid high quarantine numbers etc.

As we have shown through other disasters, I strongly believe that, as Americans and Mainers we will be able to come through this continuing saga better on the other side having worked together to see it through to the end. Your role in supporting your children and our schools was part of the reason that helped hold RSU 9 “Mt. Blue” together this past year. These efforts were also one of the reasons why I came here to be your superintendent! Thanks go to each of you for the multiple positive efforts you made to support your children, our staff and our schools this past year. And thank you in advance for the efforts you will make in the coming year!

*Flexibility, Patience and Understanding* are three important concepts which have been brought back into focus the last few weeks along with the last few days and hours. As noted in the news and I am sure through Facebook etc. the twists and turns of the pandemic are causing many around our communities, surrounding districts and our state to make adjustments on the fly. This is no different for us in RSU 9 “Mt Blue”. *Flexibility, Patience and Understanding* will be our key concepts for the year ahead both from the school to home and home to school perspectives.

I am convinced that by working together, we will be able to reopen following our present plans, which I believe are in the best interests of our students, our staff and our communities.

*Together we will keep HOPE alive within each of our children, within each of us and within each of our communities!*