

COVID-19 Pandemic

How to Mitigate and Best Control the Situation

Decisions, decisions, decisions...

- ▶ No decision made or acted upon since Sunday, March 15, 2020 has been made without the deepest of consideration in the interest of the health and well-being of our students and staff in our vision of Positively Affecting the Lives of Children.
 - ▶ As evident, we closed school two days sooner than ordered to err on the side of caution
- ▶ Through the remainder of the school year, with the ordered closure, we had to move from what was a traditional educational model, with slight progression since the days of the one-room school house, to designing, preparing and delivering a virtual platform overnight
 - ▶ For an analogy - this was like NASA being told to put a man back on the moon, as they've done before (and we hadn't), yet you must proceed without ever meeting in person to collaborate, and you cannot convene together and physically return to NASA to put the plan together for launch.

Safety

- ▶ Outside of your responsibility as parents during the school closure, in ensuring hygiene and social distancing of only your children, all the safety concerns and “what if’s” were not the issues they are now for school return planning purposes - now, it’s the priority concern/issue before us all, and rightfully so in addition to building for a new educational delivery platform. And it’s not just academics, but we need to be prepared to support the social and emotional learning needs of all children
- ▶ Our situation as a nation and state has not improved, nor has it as a county since the onset, with twice the positive cases in the last month in Florence County than during the first three months of the pandemic, and one of these cases being an individual under 18 years of age
 - ▶ yet numerous parents, educators, medical professionals and their associations and government representatives are encouraging our physical return, and...
 - ▶ numerous parents, educators, medical professionals and their associations and government representatives are cautioning our physical return
- ▶ Who is right? At the end of the day, the decision will be yours, as the parent/guardian
 - ▶ The School District of Florence County, and all the District’s staff, are committed to ensuring for a return to education - how this looks can, and will, change - and it can happen at any given moment in time

You, as parents and guardians, will have to decide what's best

- ▶ As much as I want to have an answer that is best for over 200 households and nearly 400 students, from the ages of 3 - 20 years of age, and upon numerous survey questions and responses, correspondence with concerned parents, if there is anything that's impossible it is to come up with the “right plan” for all.
- ▶ The “reality” is that this plan will not work “for all” dependent upon what your choices are, within the “reality” of what we as a school district can provide within our means of resources, capacity and time.
 - ▶ Our institution was never designed to handle such a situation, and the last time there was a similar event was more than 100 years ago, and those individuals are all since passed. In addition, our way of life, how we live our lives and our societal expectations, along with the expectations of our education system in preparing our students to be college or career ready, are exponentially different than they were upon conclusions of the first World War.
 - ▶ No one, not our government, businesses, schools, parents or students were prepared for this, yet we are being driven to move forward during uncertain times, and there will be risk.

Transparency

- ▶ The decisions you make in the interest of your children are what's best for them considering the circumstances and unknown, therefore to make the best decision. I will be 100% forthcoming, truthful and honest in sharing what we can and cannot do as a school district
- ▶ I am not here to convince you to send your child back for in-person instruction, I am not here to convince you to send your child back virtually. I will not try to encourage you to do anything that you think is in the best interest of your child during these unprecedented times, but again...COMPLETE TRANSPARENCY will be provided.
- ▶ I'm not a salesman, nor do I intend to be. I'm not a professional health expert or medical professional, I'm not an elected official - I'm first a husband and father to my own children, and I support them through my service to you as an educational leader...nothing more, nothing less.

Who to believe?

- ▶ I'm not here to argue or debate, but I will share that the information I have used in guiding our discussions as a district leadership team comes from those in the public health field and medical profession, all supported by the same science that has brought forward numerous vaccines, that have moved generations through previous pandemics, and have been relied on and in existence for many years - the same organizations that advise you to boil your water if there was suspected e-coli contamination to creating vaccines for polio and influenza
- ▶ Those I have relied on for recommendations of best practices, for those that we can implement with fidelity are:
- ▶ The Centers for Disease Control (founded in 1946), the Wisconsin Department of Health and Human Services (founded in 1967) and the Florence County Health Department, all of which are driven in their missions to best ensure our health and safety by a plethora of medical and healthcare professionals
- ▶ Additionally, the research and recommendations of professional affiliations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Wisconsin School Nurses Association.

Change...persistent, consistent change

- ▶ Through this all, it's uniqueness as the first pandemic in more than a century, and like all other pandemics, it's a pandemic due to the unknown. The recommendations of science change, as to be expected, as the outcomes change, yet the scientific processes do not.
- ▶ As frustrating and inconsistent as it seems to be almost from day to day, if we reflect, the discoveries and progressions in fighting this horrendous virus are being sought and discovered by medical professionals, based upon science. Science is progressing, and progression equates to "change."
- ▶ Therefore, my constant, through all the change, as I lead the district through this, with 420 of my colleagues throughout Wisconsin, and thousands more nationwide, is utilizing the recommendations and guidance of these renowned, enduring organizations and their professional staffs

So what are the recommendations, and can we as a District ensure all best practices?

- ▶ Unfortunately the answer is no - we cannot ensure there will not be risk if you choose to have your child return to school in person.
- ▶ The reality is from the youngest of ages that we serve, to those in their senior year, their minds are developing in many different and unique ways, and this along with a plethora of factors provide for known, and evident behaviors, different than of adults.
 - ▶ Public education is unique from any other public or private service entity, not only in purpose, but in the population of the individuals it routinely serves in large gatherings, consistently during the work week.
- ▶ The following is a summary of several very specific sets of guidelines and the probability we can adhere to the recommendations of each - I share these, as these are two guiding documents that many schools in Wisconsin, particularly the 27 school districts in CESA 8, have been most reliant on. This guidance has been the focus of nearly daily discussions and meetings over the course of the summer, in collaboration with our respective county health departments

Wisconsin Department of Health School Building Risk Assessment Tool

- ▶ There are 49 required metrics covering:
 - ▶ Visitors and nonessential person restrictions - 5/6
 - ▶ Education, monitoring and screening of staff - 7/8 (6/8 w/out school nurse)
 - ▶ Education, monitoring and screening of students - 6/7 (5/7 w/out school nurse)
 - ▶ Availability of PPE & supplies - 3/3 (if supplies are available)
 - ▶ Infection Prevention and Control Practices - 7/11 (other 4 partially or TBD upon return)
 - ▶ Communication - 8/8 (only ensured with support of school nurse)
 - ▶ Health Office Management - 2/2 (only ensured with support of school nurse)
 - ▶ Elements of School Closure/Reopening - 4/4

Total - 42/49 = 86% of DHS metrics can be met with fidelity

Wisconsin Association of School Nurses & CESA 8 School Nurses Practical Guidelines

- ▶ These Guidelines Categorize Recommended Actions Into Three Risk Categories
 - ▶ Red Zone - Substantial Community Spread
 - ▶ 26 recommended actions; can ensure 13; 13 some or none = $\geq 50\%$ Confidence
 - ▶ Yellow Zone - Minimal to Moderate Community Spread
 - ▶ 21 recommended actions; can ensure 14; 7 some or none = $\geq 67\%$ Confidence
 - ▶ Green Zone* - No Community Spread
 - ▶ 11 recommended actions; can ensure 10; 1 not possible = 91% Confidence

** Until neighboring counties and region sustains below substantial community spread, we should err on side of caution and do our best to adhere to the collective recommendations of experts and professionals advising us all in these matters - the majority of Florence County cases to date are due to those who traveled outside of Florence County and returned*

- All seven (7) Healthcare Emergency Readiness Coalition (HERC) regions in Wisconsin are “high risk”
- Florence County is in the Northeast HERC region, each surrounding county is “high risk”

Points to Ponder

- ▶ A lot of information exists, its for you to decide as a parent/guardian as to which you determine to be credible, and most impactful for your child and household specific situations - I have shared the sources I am using in guiding our school to reopening
 - ▶ Of the sources I rely on, the following are some direct quotes and statements that provide no clear right or wrong answer, or provide a perplexing situation in that:

CDC Quotes

“Scientific studies suggest that COVID-19 transmission among children in schools *may be* low. International studies that have assessed how readily COVID-19 spreads in schools also reveals low rates of transmission when community transmission is low.” (e.g. Denmark vs. Israel)

“No studies are conclusive, but the available evidence *provides reason to believe* that in-person schooling is in the best interest of students, [particularly in the context of appropriate mitigation measures similar to those implemented at essential workplaces.](#)” The CDC does go on to say, “[CDC does not currently recommend universal symptom screenings \(screening all students grades K-12\) be conducted by schools.](#)”

American Academy of Pediatrics

“Returning to school is important for the healthy development and well-being of children, but we must pursue re-opening in a way that is safe for all students, teachers and staff. Science should drive decision-making on safely reopening schools. Public health agencies must make recommendations based on evidence, not politics. We should leave it to health experts to tell us when the time is best to open up school buildings, and listen to educators and administrators to shape how we do it.”

The Decision...

- ▶ I will now begin transitioning for presentation of the School District of Florence County's, District reopening plan
- ▶ The decision of whether to return has collective input, but the final decision is yours - I cannot tell you what is best, and as I've openly shared, I cannot ensure at this point in time that we can adhere to all recommendations and guidelines in safely reopening our schools - if we could, we would not be preparing for a virtual option, for your choice, if you decide our best is not good enough, or in the possibility, for matters beyond our local control, we must go to a virtual platform for an indefinite amount of time.

“Local school leaders, public health experts, educators and parents must be at the center of decisions about how and when to reopen schools, taking into account the spread of COVID-19 in their communities and the capacities of school districts to adapt safety protocols to make in-person learning safe and feasible. For instance, schools in areas with high levels of COVID-19 community spread should not be compelled to reopen against the judgment of local experts. A one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate for return to school decisions.”

- American Academy of Pediatrics

Consistency & Simplicity Is Our Best Chance for Sustained, In-Person Instructional Delivery

- ▶ The plan you are about to see is not a plan for the full 2020-2021 school year, it will be at a maximum, for the first semester of the new school year, subject to change at any given time.
- ▶ For simplicity, consistency and utilizing the tools and strategies recommended by the CDC, DHS, Florence County Health Department, Wisconsin School Nurses Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, our day-to-day operations will remain consistent in expectations - we will not decrease our level of expectations due to a dynamic change within Florence County one week - we need to say consistent, sustained low-community spread cases throughout the entire Northeast Wisconsin HERC Region (the borders of our county do not ensure we are protected in our own bubble).
- ▶ **We will surely increase any new, best practices in risk mitigation as determined by the aforementioned institutions/agencies**, but regardless of the level of risk within Florence County, we will err on the side of caution in the interest of best protecting our students, staff and entire school-community of Florence County, **and not regress in our safety practices** due to short, volatile changes from week to week. This practice will ensure the highest probability of continual instruction, whether you choose in-person or virtual for the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year, and provide for consistency for all children and families.

School Closure

- ▶ The Superintendent of the School District of Florence County, the Director/Health Office of the Florence County Health Department and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services are the only three individuals/entities that can close our school district.
- ▶ Please understand, that any day we are scheduled to be open, due to the ever-changing environment, we may have to close and transition to a virtual platform. Please know that as the District's Administrator I may have knowledge where in consultation with local health officials and/or the District's Leadership Team, a closure may be necessary. Unfortunately, adequately staffing our facility will be a driving factor, and emergency measures in the past when there were a lack of substitute teachers, bus drivers, etc. cannot be implemented as they clearly will breakdown guidelines that we already cannot ensure with complete fidelity.
- ▶ Our best chance to prevent school closure will be to keep our staff and students as healthy as possible - this will be a collective Florence County school-community effort. In a few weeks, we will share guidance as to in what situations your child should remain home, and the conditions for their return.
 - ▶ *No longer can assumptions be made it's only "a cold, belly ache, etc." - we must treat each situation as though it could be COVID related.*