

Gardner Public Schools

Dr. Mark J. Pellegrino, *Superintendent*



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November 1, 2020

Regarding: Update on Coronavirus Transmission Monitoring

Dear Gardner Public School Community,

In this letter, I hope to address community concerns about the safety of our schools while staying in a hybrid model of instruction during the recent rise in COVID-19 cases in our community and state. Gardner Public Schools, like other Massachusetts school districts, closely monitors this state, local, and school-level data weekly. On October 26th, there were 1,216 new cases of COVID-19 in Massachusetts, and the cases in our own community have also increased substantially over the past week. We have been subsequently labeled as “red” on the [DPH Community Level Data Map](#). I have met with our School Nurse Leader, the Board of Health Director, and our Safety Committee to discuss what this means for Gardner Public Schools.

It should first be noted that in-person learning addresses many non-virus related health issues for our children. For this reason, it is important that we do what we can to have students participate in in-person learning, in a safe environment. Schools are safe places for our community. During a recent press conference, Governor Baker spoke about the increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases, and provided information from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health about transmission of COVID-19 in the state. His message was very clear: “The kids in schools are not spreaders of COVID-19. I mean, there’s no better example of that right now than the parochial schools in Massachusetts. They have 28,000 kids and 4,000 employees who have been back in-person learning since the middle of August, and they have a handful of cases.”. He also said there have been hundreds of thousands of students returning to the classroom and learning in the hybrid model, with only about 150-160 cases in schools.

According to the Department of Public Health, the increase in recent cases can be mostly attributed to social gatherings that are occurring where people are not wearing masks or social distancing. Youth hockey was recently shut down. Interestingly, it was not shut down because of transmission of the virus on the ice, during games. Instead, the transmission was mainly due to social interactions of parents and children that happened before and after hockey games, and in the stands during the game. In contrast to these loosely structured events, highly structured environments with strict protocols keep us safe.

This notion is supported by our own data and experiences. Specifically, our substantially separate special education classrooms, preschool classrooms, and all staff have been in our buildings since September 15th, yet we have had no school related cases of COVID-19. Our teachers in these classrooms have had a great deal of close contact with these higher needs populations, yet there have been no cases or transmissions in our schools. Our protocols have kept the virus from entering or being transmitted in the schools. They keep our entire community

safer, and allow us to continue in-person learning. Frankly, the governor also pointed out the fact that it is safer for our students to get their much-needed social needs met in school, rather than in unsupervised and less-structured social events.

The decision to revert back to remote learning is done on a case-by-case basis. Similar to Gardner, some districts are “red,” but are still facilitating in-person, hybrid learning. Other local districts are “yellow,” but because of students and/or staff who have tested positive and were in attendance, they were forced to move from hybrid learning to remote learning. To date, we have yet to have a positive case of a staff or student who attended in-person instruction while contagious. We will eventually see positive cases in our own district. When that happens, we will use contact tracing to determine those that have had close contact exposure, and require them to quarantine and get tested in accordance with our [COVID-19 response to scenarios protocol](#). This data will also supplement state-wide, community, and other broad data to inform the decision to stay open for in-person learning, change to remote learning, or even close specific programs, or the entire district. Data and science will drive these decisions, not emotions or generalized fear.

One example of such a decision we have already had to make is ending our Fall 1 Sports Season. Knowing the difficulty athletes have to practice masking and social distancing while competing, we have been concerned about their exposure to others. Although we have had no instances of COVID-19 positive cases in our own athletes, some of the teams we play against have. Due to the increased exposure in sports and the number of people needing to quarantine because of close contact with a positive individual, we felt this was a necessary action.

The health and safety of our school community is our top priority. The Safety Committee will continue to meet weekly to review state, community, district, and school-level data. If the time comes that we have evidence that there is school transmission happening, or the number of cases coming into the schools poses unacceptable risk, we will swiftly and appropriately respond. This could mean moving to the remote model for a classroom, a grade, a school, or even the entire district. Until that time, we have an obligation to our students and families to provide them with a quality education in school, following the health and safety protocols that we have in place which have been proven to keep transmission from happening in our schools.

As always, thank you for your support and understanding during these unprecedented times. Feel free to contact me via email or phone if you have any questions or concerns. Stay safe, and don't forget to vote!

Sincerely,



Mark J. Pellegrino, Ed.D.