

Superintendent's Report

November 2, 2021 Board Meeting

Dr. Michael J. Martirano, Superintendent



COVID-19 positivity and quarantine rates

- Good afternoon, Board members. I'll begin my report with an update on our school health metrics, which continue to show encouraging trends.
- As of yesterday, November 1st, our seven-day total of positive COVID cases in schools is 48.
- As of today, we have 728 students and 27 staff members in quarantine. The number in quarantine remains similar to my last report. With our 5 current active outbreaks, we have a total of 13 students who were initially identified as close contacts and ultimately tested positive over the 14-day quarantine period; this is a decline from the total of 28 testing positive on October 21st.
- Although the Maryland Department of Health recently provided school systems with options for adjusting quarantine requirements, I have consulted with Howard County Health Officer Dr. Maura Rossman, and at this time we have no plans to revise our current quarantining protocols. The current precautions we have in place are helping to mitigate the spread of the virus in our schools. I am optimistic that the impending approval of vaccines for our children ages 5 through 11 will add another layer of protection and at that time, the number of students needing to quarantine could significantly decrease.
- The Howard County Health Department anticipates that the approval of COVID-19 vaccines for children aged 5 through 11 will be announced within the next 1-2 days. We recently surveyed parents of our Grade K-6 students to gauge vaccination intentions for their children in this age group. The survey data, which represents approximately 44% of students in these grades, indicates that over 87% of children in this age group would definitely be vaccinated.
- As I've mentioned previously, the survey was intended strictly for planning purposes, and the data does not include names or other identifying data.

- Anticipating that approval, the Health Department has already acquired a limited number of vaccines for this age group and plans to hold a clinic this Friday, November 5t at Howard Community College, with plans for additional clinics as more vaccine supply becomes available. Vaccines will also be available at pediatrician offices and other private providers. We will continue to collaborate with the Health Department to support all student and community vaccination efforts. I will keep the Board and community updated as further information becomes available.
- I'm pleased to note that a large proportion of Howard County 12-17 year olds have been vaccinated. Howard County Health Department County data released yesterday indicate that 83.5% of residents in this age group are fully vaccinated, and 90.8% have received at least one dose.

Student Attendance

- The Maryland State Department of Education has released additional attendance guidance for students who are required to quarantine but who are otherwise able to participate in academic activities.
- Students will be counted as present for the school day if they engage in at least a half day of meaningful academic activities. These activities include synchronous check-ins with teachers, virtual tutoring services via the Evening School program, and access to instructional materials in Canvas, and for elementary students include 20 minutes of work in Lexia and/or 20 minutes in Dreambox each school day.
- Instructional staff are doing a phenomenal job working with students and families of students who are in quarantine and will continue to provide this same level of support moving forward.

Midterms and Finals

- We have engaged in discussions the past two Board meetings related to midterms and finals for this school year. I wanted to bring closure to one point that was raised at the last meeting.
- While midterms and finals will be given this year, policy provides flexibility to teachers to offer them as they best see fit. It is not required to be a 90 minute exam but could be a

project or other activity that provides meaningful feedback on student achievement and is based on the individual student's mastery of curriculum standards.

- I have encouraged teachers to use their discretion to offer midterms and finals that provide them with that demonstration of knowledge while lessening the load on students this school year and will provide more direction to School Administrators.

Staff Vaccines

- We continue to make progress in ensuring all staff are either vaccinated for COVID-19 or tested weekly. To date, 93% of all full and part-time staff have confirmed their fully vaccinated status.
- I'm pleased to note that the majority of unvaccinated staff have complied with testing requirements. We continue to work with those who were not tested to understand their challenges and help ensure they have access and availability and understand the importance of this requirement.

Support for Staff

- As you are aware, our staff have been navigating a tremendous increase in their workload due to the pandemic. It is critical that we do everything possible to help to alleviate the pressure on our staff and support their well-being. This is doubly important in the face of the staffing challenges that we are experiencing.
- We have put in place several strategies to support staff in managing their workload.
 - I have designated 5 non-student days during this school year as days when school-based staff can telework. These days include October 15th, which already occurred, and November 4th, January 24th, February 1st, and May 3rd.
 - School administrators have been given the flexibility and directive to hold virtual meetings whenever possible, to help avoid the stress that many feel when attending large in-person gatherings.
 - Central office staff have been providing coverage of unfilled positions in schools, primarily in the cafeteria and as special education paraeducators and student assistants. As of yesterday, November 1st, all cafeteria support needs will be addressed by schools. Instead, we will soon expand central office staff coverage to

- support health rooms, while continuing to provide coverage as special education paraeducators and student assistants.
- We are providing additional pay to staff who are willing to begin work early or stay late to supervise students who arrive early or remain later after school due to doubled bus routes.
 - We are also offering additional pay to paraeducators who substitute for teachers during one- or two-hour blocks of time, and additional pay to teachers who agree to substitute during one of their planning periods.
 - We have assigned 1 or 2 daily permanent substitute teachers to every school. These substitute teachers report to their designated school every day and cover for a substitute job at that school that has not been filled, or support the school in another manner when there are no substitute vacancies.
- These measures have been helpful, but we need to go further in easing the burden on staff, many of whom are straining nearly to the breaking point. We are working to advance several additional measures.
 - Later during this Board meeting, we will seek the Board's approval to modify the academic calendar and create several 3-hour early dismissal days during the remainder of the school year. This time will give staff additional hours to complete tasks that are part of their professional responsibilities, including grading, planning and preparing materials of instruction, and tend to their personal well-being.
 - We are negotiating an updated MOU with HCEA regarding COVID-related working conditions, and we intend to bring this to the Board for approval in the upcoming weeks.
 - I intend to provide 12-month staff with two additional days off over winter break to give everyone time for additional rest at the end of the year. The particular days will be communicated to staff soon.
 - We are using emergency procurement authorization to outsource contact tracing phone calls to a contractor. Contact tracing has put a significant strain on school administrators and health room staff, which will be greatly alleviated by outsourcing this process to the contractor.

- Elementary teachers will receive guidance from the curricular offices about expectations for submitting grades on Canvas.
- Staff will reinforce that teachers have 48 hours to respond to parent inquiries and will include that information, along with asking for continued patience, in a community message being sent this week.
- We will continue to strategize ways to support staff as we navigate the challenges that we expect will continue to confront our system through this school year and beyond.

Student Transportation

- We continue to be challenged by a shortage of bus drivers. We currently have approximately 95 driver vacancies, and that number has held steady since the start of the school year. As you know, this challenge is shared not just among other Maryland school districts, but in transportation efforts nationwide.
- We have to find innovative ways to make driving for Howard County schools the most attractive job to the limited pool of available drivers. Our bus driver wages are competitive with those of other Maryland districts and staff from the Office of Student Transportation are exploring several opportunities to overcome the driver shortage. Board members have been provided with updates on this work and I hope to bring solutions to the Board and community soon.
- We will hold our second Hiring Fair this week for bus drivers as well as staff in other critical shortage areas, including food services, lunch and recess monitors, custodians, paraeducators and student assistants. I urge anyone interested in exploring any of these opportunities to visit the fair this Thursday, November 4th, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Wilde Lake High School. No registration is required, and more details are available on our website.

Civility Reminder

- We have all been under a huge strain for many months, with the heavy weight of a seemingly endless pandemic piled on by a contentious political environment, natural disasters, and periods of social unrest.

- Many are feeling exhausted and overwhelmed by stress, fear and conflict, and it's understandable that nerves are frayed. But what is not acceptable is when people release their angst by lashing out at others. It is particularly disturbing that too many have lashed out at a member of the school health team, a teacher, front office staff, bus driver or other staff member to express their indignation or disagreement about our safety protocols or any number of other issues.
- I am greatly dismayed that many dedicated staff members have been the target of verbal abuse and angry emails and social media posts from unhappy parents or community members. Disagreement is acceptable and collaboration with parents is essential to the educational process, but I urge everybody to please refrain from vitriolic language and actions towards our hardworking staff. It is demoralizing and counterproductive to our mission of educating and nurturing students.
- Please understand, school health staff, teachers, bus drivers and other staff members are exceptionally dedicated individuals doing their best and working their hardest to nurture, educate and protect students during extremely challenging circumstances. Quite simply, they are heroes, and they deserve our gratitude and respect at all times, even when they must carry out a protocol or practice that someone doesn't agree with.
- Since the start of the school year, we've observed that many students are needing to relearn acceptable behaviors and appropriate social skills. Please remember, parents and guardians are our children's first and most important teachers. Your child is always watching and modeling your behavioral cues. Make sure your actions and words reflect the kind of behavior you want your child to learn.

Closing remarks

- I want to end my report by again expressing my continued appreciation for all Howard County Public School System staff, who have been rising far above and beyond to support our students during this most challenging time. Today is Day 42 and Week 10 of the school year, and I continue to be in awe of our staff's resilience and commitment to keeping our students safe and healthy as we focus on their education.

Thank you Board members, this concludes my report.