



September 25, 2020

Dear Parents and Guardians,

In our original return to school plan, we had said that we would re-evaluate the educational and community health landscapes and consider multiple factors before deciding to bring students back five days a week. In the most recent survey we administered to parents, we had over 2,000 surveys taken, and 85% of those surveyed answered “yes” or “maybe” when asked if they would send their children back five days a week if they had that option. While the great majority of the feedback on our hybrid model has been positive, it is clear from teacher feedback and our observations that it is putting a tremendous amount of stress on our teachers and parents; it does not seem to be sustainable for a very long period of time. It has been especially tough at the elementary level, where synchronous learning is more dependent on having an adult available to assist the younger children. Our teachers have also said that they have not been able to form strong relationships with students yet because of the fractured nature of the hybrid model. As we know, especially in the primary grades, that is a critical facet in student learning, development, and success.

We have been monitoring the cases in Allegheny County and in the West Jefferson Hills School District. While the cases at the county have remained stable and the percent of positive tests have gone down, there has been an uptick in cases in Jefferson and Pleasant Hills in the last month. That said, our first month of school has been extremely successful from a health and safety standpoint. Our nurses have been very prudent with managing students that have any COVID-19 symptoms, and they have worked collaboratively with local pediatricians and the Allegheny County Health Department. Our parents have also been very vigilant in reporting potential cases and exposures and keeping their kids at home when showing any symptoms. To date, we have only had six confirmed positive student cases throughout the entire district, and there has been zero evidence of transmission or spread in school. It’s also important to consider that these cases were attributed to three different families; and in all cases, the children contracted the virus from a parent or relative. When examining trends and contact tracing across our district, and even the whole county, this is especially true with children under 10 years old. The final factor we considered has been discussions that we have had with other districts that have been back full-time since the first day of school. They have all experienced success. In most cases, more and more students in those districts are choosing to go back five days a week rather than continuing to remain online.

We have been preparing for the next phase of our reopening plan since we approved the initial return to school plan. When considering all of the variables to make this decision, we feel that bringing kids back in a phased and targeted manner would be the safest and most sensible approach moving forward. The first group we would like to bring back would be our K-2 population at McClellan and Gill Hall Elementary Schools. We feel that the negative impact this has had on learning and developing positive relationships with peers and adults has been significant. These students also happen to be the population that has had the greatest success returning to school full-time across the county. With no current evidence of transmission or spread in schools for this population in Allegheny County, we are strongly considering bringing back our K-2 students on October 12. It is important to understand that depending on the number of students that choose to come back five days a week, we will not have six feet of social distancing in most classes or on our buses. The rest of our mitigation strategies in our return to school plan will still be in effect. We will be meeting again with the Allegheny County Health Department and also reach out to the medical professionals on our health and safety committee. Our plan moving forward would be to continue to monitor and track the cases across Allegheny County and within our district until we feel it was safe to bring other buildings back to five days a week in person instruction. We will continue to offer synchronous learning five days a week online instruction through Canvas and the WJHSD Cyber Academy as options. There is a possibility that a student's teachers could change in the five-day synchronous option through Canvas, but that is completely dependent on enrollment. We will need to get all K-2 parents to commit to a specific option **prior to Friday, October 2**, so we can get everything in place to accommodate the increased number of students. In addition to our K-2 population, we also plan to reach out to some of our at-risk students in grades 3-12 who are struggling with the hybrid or online model and bring them back to school as soon as possible. We have had our special education and ELL population back five days a week successfully since the beginning of the school year.

I want to thank all of our staff, students, and parents for making the first month of school a success. It has been refreshing to see the collaboration, compliance, and cohesiveness of everyone working together with the same goal in mind. We have to continue to use safety best practices and work together moving forward to continue to keep our students, staff, and community safe. **We are planning a virtual forum for all K-2 parents on Wednesday, September 30**, to answer any questions that parents may have regarding our transition plan.

Sincerely,



Dr. Michael Ghilani  
Superintendent