



October 8, 2021

Dear HPS Families and Staff,

After a smoky week, we can all breathe a collective sigh of relief today as cooler fall weather pushes out the smoke, at least for now. Thank you to all who are working the fire lines, doing dangerous work away from friends and family, to protect our property and communities.

With fires burning all around us, literally and figuratively, we must remember to stay focused on the positive things happening every day within our district and in our community. In that spirit, I'd like to share that Helena Public Schools has achieved a new milestone in our [PAX program \(Peace, Productivity, Health and Happiness\)](#), which helps K-5 students build emotional resiliency and coping skills.

Each of our 11 elementary schools has committed to implementing the PAX Good Behavior Game over the next five years, earning the district "Exemplar" program status. The 2019 Legislature allocated funding for Montana schools to participate in PAX through the state's suicide prevention program. In addition to teaching kids productivity, teamwork, and resiliency skills, PAX has been shown to help children develop coping skills to prevent problems such as mental illness, substance abuse and suicidal thinking. Thank you to the staff, students, and families who have made our district's participation in this critical program a success.

Turning to our COVID update, our district transmission rates remain steady this week. One of the most powerful strategies in the fight against COVID is the ability to quickly confirm and isolate positive cases. So, I'm pleased to share that our rapid-testing program will be expanded Monday to include all grades and all staff district-wide.

Students and employees who develop symptoms while at school will now have the opportunity to receive a free BinaxNow rapid COVID-19 test, with results available in 15 minutes. Those who develop symptoms at home may contact their school to arrange a testing appointment at a designated location at their school. Parents must sign a consent form authorizing testing of any student.

In addition to boosting our prevention efforts, the rapid tests will save families significant time and money, as tests can be expensive and difficult to find. We appreciate our school nursing and office staff for their work to expand our testing capacity during what is already an extraordinarily busy time.

On the operations front, I shared in last week's letter that the district is launching a new busing plan in response to a shortage of bus drivers across Montana and nationwide. A new bus schedule, to take effect Nov. 1, will be released October 21. The schedule will introduce short-term, rolling route suspensions district wide.

In a nutshell, this means that families on every route (with the exception of Special Education buses) will need to provide transportation to and from school for approximately five consecutive days of every month. Families will receive compensation for their school transportation costs during the week their route is suspended. Route schedules will be provided well in advance to allow families time to make other transportation arrangements. We will work with families who don't have a vehicle or other means of transportation. If you need assistance, please contact Transportation Director Tom Cohn as soon as possible at 324-2100 or transportation@helenaschools.org so we can make arrangements prior to the start of the new busing plan.

As I shared last week, the plan ensures that no single neighborhood or school shoulders an unfair burden of the driver shortage. Other districts in Montana and across the country have canceled routes to some neighborhoods for the entire school year, which is something we wanted to avoid. We understand that any disruption to busy family schedules is difficult, and we thank you for helping us get through this situation together. We also ask employers to please be flexible with employees who need to make schedule changes to get their kids to and from school. If we're able to bring on additional bus drivers, the frequency of route outages will be reduced.

As we close out another week, I thank you all for your continued efforts to keep our students in school. Our community is in a difficult place right now, but I'm optimistic that we'll see better days ahead of us soon. Our collective community spirit will carry us through.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rex Weltz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Rex Weltz
Superintendent, Helena Public Schools