



December 10, 2021

Dear Helena Public Schools Families,

This fall, our district accomplished a return to full-time, in-person school that has been essential to the academic progress, health, and welfare of our children. When I say district, I mean our whole community – teachers, staff, parents, community members and, above all, our students. It took all of us working together to avoid the school closures and other disruptions seen elsewhere.

I am especially grateful to our students and their families for following the COVID safety plan we introduced in August. At that time, I assured parents that I would base our mask status on local conditions.

As we approach Winter Break and look ahead to 2022, those conditions have changed. The number of positive COVID-19 cases in our schools district-wide is declining each week. Case numbers have dropped from highs of 19 or more per day in mid-October, to five or fewer cases each day this week. Meanwhile, our K-8 families have had the opportunity to fully vaccinate their students. The opening of the district's free, COVID-19 rapid test clinics also has strengthened our ability to keep positive cases out of the school environment.

Given our current circumstances, I have made the decision to move into mask-optional status for all grade levels the day we return from Winter Break. **Effective January 4**, masks will be optional in all district buildings for students and staff. We will continue to require masks to be worn on school buses, per federal law.

As we look ahead to this change upon our return from Winter Break, I want to make two things very clear:

- In the event of a local spike or surge, and in consultation with local health care officials, I will strongly consider a return to a mask requirement.
- With the exception of masking, our other COVID-19 safety protocols remain firmly in place, including social distancing when possible; a focus on cleaning; the use of outdoor space when possible; introducing fresh outside air into our learning spaces; the use of portable air filters; and regular cleaning and maintenance of air-handling systems.

As we continue to adjust to the ever-changing COVID landscape, each of us has different comfort levels. Schools will respect individual and family decisions to mask or not to mask and will foster an environment of respect among students and staff.

Adjusting our mask policy is another step in our return to normalcy. The next step will occur January 24, when parents, guests, and volunteers will have the opportunity to come back to our buildings. Parent involvement is an important piece of a healthy school environment and I know our parents and volunteers are more than ready to set foot in our buildings again. In advance of January 24, we're working on protocols to ensure a careful and safe transition. Watch for more details to come soon.

I would like to emphasize that the changes announced today won't take effect until we return from winter break: **Mask optional status begins January 4 and building visitation begins January 24.** In the meantime, please continue to follow our current policies to ensure a safe and smooth transition.

With Winter Break fast-approaching, I want to share a couple other reminders.

Dates for our COVID-19 test clinics are now posted through December 21. Rapid-tests are available, free-of-charge, to all district students and employees and their immediate household members. Appointments are required. [Click here](#) to schedule.

Earlier this week, you received a school-climate survey via email. It's important to me to learn what's working for our families and where we need to improve as we approach the halfway point in the school year. Please carve out a few minutes to give us feedback. HPS has partnered with a third-party, Panorama Education, to ensure that your responses are secure and confidential.

Finally, I would like to thank all who responded to our social media post this week on the reflective tape many of our students are sporting on their backpacks. In November, a Helena Middle School student was struck by a car on her way to school while crossing Broadway in front of Jefferson Elementary. I was among the first on the scene, an experience that prompted me to ask our administrators what more we can do to keep our kids safe on dark winter mornings.

A well-meaning Facebook post credited me as the mastermind of the tape idea, but I want to give credit where credit is due. This brilliant idea, no pun intended, came from our humble Helena Middle School Assistant Principal, Dawn Rowling. Thank you, Dawn!

In closing, I wish you a fantastic weekend with your family as we prepare for our last full school week before Winter Break!

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rex Weltz". The signature is stylized with a large, looping flourish at the end.

Rex Weltz
Superintendent, Helena Public School