



December 17, 2021

Dear Helena Public Schools Families and Staff,

As we close out our last full week before Winter Break, many of our district traditions are coming back to life.

High school and middle school students are back on stage, sharing the fruits of long hours of practice and rehearsal. The Capital High School Advanced Orchestra and the Capital High Jazz Choir gave brief performances at the Central Office this week, which reinforced to us just how accomplished our students are.

Meanwhile, our elementary students are busy rehearsing and recording their winter programs. I would like to thank our talented music teachers, who began planning these virtual performances in August and have poured their creative energy into making them special.

While we would all like to focus on the season's traditions, this week's cyber threats are on all of our minds. Districts have taken varying approaches to communicating with parents. However, I will always lean toward sharing information with you, especially when it's related to school safety. Please know that this is not to raise alarm, but to provide you with knowledge that enables you to have a conversation with your child and to make decisions that are best for your family.

To share a piece of good news, our COVID cases among students and staff continue to decline, with only three cases reported so far this week. We will continue to work with local health officials to keep a close eye on the Omicron variant over the Winter Break. While Omicron is creating new uncertainties, health officials are emphasizing a single message: Vaccination is our best tool to keep our communities healthy. To find a vaccination location, please visit the [Lewis & Clark Public Health COVID-19 HUB](#). To schedule an appointment at one of our free district COVID testing clinics, visit bit.ly/HPSCOVIDTEST. School testing sites will be closed over Winter Break, however test locations can be found through the [LCPH COVID-19 HUB](#).

As I noted last week, a factor in scheduling our return to mask-optional status for all grades is the availability of vaccines for kids ages 5-11. Vaccinations don't reach their full protectiveness until two weeks after the second dose. The Jan. 4 effective date for mask-optional status allows the hundreds of kids who received their second shot at last weekend's clinic at Bryant Elementary to have the full benefit

of the vaccine before returning to school. Likewise, the January 24 opening of schools to parents, volunteers, and visitors is strategically timed to allow us to establish visitation protocols for a safe transition.

While our COVID-19 response protocols are a critical piece of our return to school and the second half of the year, they will not define it.

Our focus will continue to be moving our students, our staff, and our district forward – academically, emotionally and, for the district, operationally. Your feedback is an essential piece of that strategic planning work. If you haven't already, please take a few minutes to share your thoughts. HPS has partnered with a third-party, Panorama Education, to ensure that your responses are secure and confidential. If you didn't receive the email, please let your school principal know. The survey closes December 23.

Speaking of moving forward, I want to congratulate five educators who recently earned or renewed their National Board Certifications: Jodi Delaney, Katie Leterski, Kristen Lyndes, Hope Morrison, and Jaydee Zakovi.

Board certification is a rigorous and often multi-year process. These teachers have pursued the gold standard of professional development in the education world, and their learning and leadership will raise up their schools and colleagues. We know this, because Delaney, Leterski, Lyndes, Morrison, and Zakovi are among 21 Board-Certified educators at Helena Public Schools. Each of them deserves recognition for their dedication to our students.

Dedication to lifelong learning and self-improvement are fundamental to serving our students and that goes for me as well. The past four months as Superintendent have been a challenging and rewarding time to lead. I wouldn't have it any other way, and I couldn't have done it without the support and guidance of all those who participate to make learning and growth happen every day in our district – the Board of Trustees, our leadership team at the Central Office, school principals and administrators, educators, support staff, our students, and their families. I am honored to lead this district and look forward to continuing to grow as your Superintendent and as a district.

I wish you a restful and healthy Winter Break with your loved ones.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rex Wertz". The signature is stylized with a large, looping "R" and "W".

Rex Wertz
Superintendent, Helena Public Schools