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October 19, 2020

Dear SUSD Families,

I am writing to share information with respect to the Scottsdale Unified School District COVID response efforts and current challenges and concerns. As of last Thursday, we had 25 known, lab-confirmed, active cases of COVID in students and staff throughout the District, representing about 0.11% of our total - up from 9 cases in the prior week. Fourteen of those were at Chaparral High School. Many people have asked questions about what the District is doing in response. Others have suggested the number of students with COVID at Chaparral is much higher than what has been reported. I think it is important for our entire community to have a better understanding of the process the District uses to investigate reported cases and the action that is taken once cases are confirmed.

While our students and staff are doing their part while at school, activity outside of school appears to be the reason for the increase in cases noted this past week. Many people traveled for fall break and groups of students who traveled together have become ill. Others participated in larger gatherings with friends (unmasked and not physically distanced), which also appears to have been an environment where the virus was passed to others. Regardless of whether you think the response protocol to COVID is an overreaction, *our ability to keep our schools open is dependent on how the entire community chooses to act and not just what happens at school.* COVID cases in Arizona dropped by 75% after the mask mandate went into effect. We know that wearing masks, combined with physical distancing where possible, and frequent hand-washing are critical elements to reducing the spread. The other critical element is staying home if you are not feeling well and/or are exhibiting COVID-like symptoms. It is this last point that is causing me some of the greatest concern. It has been reported that students are coming to school sick, either with COVID-like symptoms or, possibly, even with a known COVID positive test that hasn't been reported to the health department. ***If students and families send sick children to school, our ability to remain open is in serious jeopardy.***

We are living in a time in which friends and neighbors are now at odds over this pandemic and many other challenges our society is facing. The polarization is real, and there are some in our community who are using it as a wedge to divide us even further. Dismissal of the threat of COVID is as much of a problem as paralyzing fear that can lead to inaction and full shutdown. The false choices of pretending that COVID is not a threat and, therefore, living as though it is no more of a challenge than the flu, or closing everything down until we have a vaccine, undermine the thoughtful and balanced approach that is necessary for our community to weather this storm and come through on the other side stronger as a result.

I want our children to be in school. I want our teachers and staff to be safe, knowing that our parents are partnering with us to reduce the risk of transmitting COVID by following the mitigation strategies every day, keeping sick children home and notifying us when they are aware their child has COVID or a family member has COVID. I hope you find the information regarding our process and approach helpful.

SUSD COVID Response Process

- Initially a parent, student or MCDPH notifies the school of a COVID case.

- Information is processed through the school nurse of each building and contact is made with Maricopa County Department of Public Health (MCDPH) to confirm it has a record of the lab-confirmed positive case, as well. In some cases, the county has contacted us about a case, in others, we report it to them and they initiate a process to determine whether it is a confirmed case.
- Whether or not a person has a lab-confirmed case, if they are sick and exhibiting symptoms consistent with COVID-like illness, they are asked to stay home.
- When the county confirms a positive case, they send a letter to the nurse with communication protocols and recommendations to proceed with identifying anyone who was in close contact with the positive case. **Close contact** is defined as being within 6 feet or less of a positive case for 10 minutes or more (the minutes do not have to be consecutive). This is one of the reasons we have emphasized having seating charts and carefully tracking attendance each day, so we are able to quickly identify students and staff who meet the definition of close contacts.
- Individuals who are determined to have been a **close contact** are required to quarantine for 14 days, pursuant to guidance from MCDPH, and to monitor for COVID-like symptoms. Many parents have asked whether their child can return to school and school activities before the 14 days have elapsed if they have tested and it comes back as negative. The MCDPH indicates that the only exception to the 14-day quarantine from the last date of exposure is if a student has had a lab-confirmed PCR or antigen test within the last three months, in which case those individuals do not need to quarantine. The reason for not accepting a negative test as evidence a student can return is the 2-14 day incubation period of the virus, meaning a person could have a negative test early in the incubation period and still be carrying and shedding the virus.
- Decisions with respect to closing a school (e.g. Chaparral) are made in partnership with MCDPH. The health department is not recommending closure at this time, but we are carefully monitoring the data and remain in close contact with public health officials.

Communication Protocol

- When a case is confirmed by MCDPH, a general notice letter is sent to families indicating a positive case of COVID has been identified and that there is a potential exposure to COVID in the school. Sometimes the general communication letter only goes out to a classroom or a grade level, and in other cases it is sent to the entire building. This determination is based on the facts related to potential exposure.
- For those who have been identified as being in **close contact**, a separate letter is sent to notify the family of the additional risk and the requirement to quarantine for 14-days from the date of last exposure. When possible, individual phone calls are made to the families of close contacts, as well.
- MCDPH may determine a school “outbreak” of COVID-19. This is defined as two (2) or more students or staff who have tested positive for COVID-19 within a 14-day period who could have had some close contact, such as in a classroom or on a school sports team, do not live in the same household and were not identified as close contacts of each other in another setting during the MCDPH case investigation (e.g. friends who play together in each other’s homes). In this case, the district will send an outbreak letter to the entire community.
- The letters that are sent out include COVID information that MCDPH recommends we share with families. While many parents may be aware of the information provided in the letter with respect to COVID, others may not have had as much experience or understanding of the virus, and so we include that information in each of the letters.

On October 12, we had students on all of our campuses for the first time since March 6, 2020 (the Friday before spring break last school year). As our community, state and nation continue to navigate this global

pandemic, we have been working to ensure our children are able to receive the education they need and deserve, while also taking measures to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of our students and staff. I continue to receive emails and 'Let's Talk' dialogues from highly credentialed individuals in our community, arguing that we have not made the correct decisions with respect to our return to learn plan (with some suggesting we should open up more quickly and others indicating we should be remaining virtual). What I can tell you is that our team has carefully considered the data, advice from public health officials, and lessons learned from other communities that opened before us to ensure our plan would allow us to remain open once students returned. Unfortunately, that potential is now at risk as a result of decisions that are being made by some in our community, and I think it is important to raise this concern with you and ask for your assistance.

Since students started returning to our campuses on September 14, I have had the opportunity to visit various buildings and classrooms to see how things are going. I have been impressed with the substantial compliance with our mask-wearing requirement by students at all levels. This was a significant concern for many before we started, but our staff and students have shown an ability to respect the requirement as a condition of being able to have school in-person. I have also seen just how important it is that our students are able to be back on campus. There is no question in my mind that in-person teaching and learning is better for the majority of our students. I also recognize that there are some students who are able to thrive in an online environment and others who have to remain online as a result of health considerations. My recommendation to the Governing Board related to next steps is driven by the needs of all 22,000 of our students, along with our nearly 3,000 staff members. In order to keep our schools open for in-person learning, we have to remain in the moderate (or yellow) category for spread of the virus. If the community spread indicators return to red for two consecutive weeks, the recommendation from public health officials is to return to virtual education for all students, because a red metric indicates substantial community spread.

These have not been easy times for any of us. Balancing the health and safety challenges while providing high-quality educational opportunities has always been our goal. *We are committed to doing what it takes to keep our schools open, but we cannot do it alone.* While I miss seeing smiling faces and would rather have people see my facial expressions, I choose to wear a mask. This is not because I am afraid of COVID (although I do have family members with compromised immune systems and I am concerned if they were to become ill), but because I do not want to be a person who could unknowingly and unintentionally pass the virus on to someone else. It is a sign of care and concern for my neighbor and my community. I respectfully ask you, our parents and partners, to assist us in being able to keep our schools open. Together we can do this. Our students, your children, are depending on us.

Sincerely,

Scott A. Menzel, PhD
Superintendent