

Canastota Central School District

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Canastota School Community:

I hope you all had a Merry Christmas and are enjoying your holiday break. Without question, December has proven itself to be a unique and unprecedented month. The impact of COVID has certainly left its mark on the 2020-21 school year in an undeniable way. The move to remote learning during the past couple of weeks has allowed us to regroup from the COVID surge that surfaced throughout our region and across the state. As you know, we decided to move to fully remote instruction beginning on December 14. From the very beginning of this pandemic, the position of the District has been to offer our students in-person instruction when we could do so safely and responsibly. **I am pleased to announce that Canastota Central Schools will return to in-person instruction beginning Monday, January 4th.** This announcement means that students in grades K-6 will return to daily in-person instruction, and students in grades 7-12 will return to their previous hybrid schedule. There are several key factors that shaped this decision, including the following:

- The number of staff members and students who are currently placed into mandated isolation (positive case) or quarantine (based on exposure) will be reduced substantially by the end of this week. Staffing issues based on high quarantine and isolation numbers were one of the major factors in our decision to go remote several weeks ago. We are now in a much stronger position to adequately staff our classrooms.
- In consultation with the Madison County Health Department, it has become clear that the spread of COVID is not linked to the school. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the infection has been introduced from an external source (parent, sibling, etc). We have done an exceptional job of containing the spread in the school itself, and our staff and students should be commended for doing such a great job in this regard. As many experts have noted, school is likely one of the safest places for children to be during this time because of the strict protocols currently in place.
- We know that for the vast majority of our students, they simply learn better when they can physically be in school. The feedback we've received on this from students and parents has overwhelmingly supported this sentiment. When we have the capability to offer in-person instruction, we believe that we should do so in the best interest of the students we serve. We also know that the social-emotional impact of being isolated from teachers and peers can have a detrimental impact on children. Not only is it academically preferable to have kids in school, but it also makes sense from a social-emotional perspective as well.

While we are announcing our plan to return to in-person/hybrid instruction beginning next week, we all need to be realistic in understanding that the situation remains quite fluid. At any point, circumstances might dictate that we need to transition for periods of time to remote learning due to positive cases or quarantines. Unfortunately, this will be our reality for the next several months until the vaccine is widely available. Our District is following through on our commitment to provide in-person instruction whenever possible. In order to make this happen, we all need to be absolutely committed to taking the following steps:

- The **daily health screener** must be completed by every in-person staff member and student every day – **no exceptions**. Filling out this simple form allows us to have confidence that nobody at school is exhibiting symptoms. Anyone experiencing COVID symptoms should not be at school.
- **Masks** must continue to be worn throughout the day except for identified mask breaks and/or lunch. This is necessary even when individuals are at a distance of six feet or greater.
- Proper **distancing** between individuals must be maintained consistently throughout the day. The distance depends on the type of activity (for example, many activities are 6 feet, but some, like physical education classes, requires a 12 foot distance between participants).
- Proper **cleaning and sanitizing** must continue to occur consistently throughout the school community. We have access to soap and hand sanitizer in abundance throughout the facilities – we must make sure we use it. The district will continue to conduct the cleaning and disinfecting practices that have proven to be successful since the very beginning of this school year.

The bottom line is this – we need to use common sense as we approach our daily schedules. This means that we avoid unnecessary opportunities for exposure, such as gathering in groups; improperly wearing your mask (i.e. wearing the mask with your nose exposed); eating in close proximity to others, etc. Our track record speaks volumes – doing the basic things well helps tremendously in reducing the threat of internal spread of COVID. We can't let up now, we need to be committed to keeping ourselves and our neighbors safe. We need to be as smart as possible in bridging the gap in time between now and when the vaccine is widely available to all community members.

I'm confident that we can return to in person instruction in a safe and responsible way. From the beginning, I've talked about the importance of finding balance in how we operate the school and our daily lives during the pandemic. This means taking all of the necessary precautions, and when we can do this, we find a way to get our kids back into school. There is no guarantee that we won't have positive cases; the reality is COVID will be a presence in our society for months to come. However, we can function in a responsible way that provides a safe and responsible environment where kids can learn and engage socially with their peers. Let me be perfectly clear, I am not saying a "COVID-proof environment", but rather a "safe and responsible" environment. We have set the bar high regarding expectations for our standards for operating under the pandemic, and we will continue to do so moving forward. I suppose the only guarantee to not get COVID would mean never leaving your house and having no interactions with others. This is simply not possible to do for months at a time. We can, however, continue to commit ourselves to maintain an environment that takes all of the necessary precautions, and provides the many benefits of in-person learning. We look forward to seeing our students on Monday. I wish everyone a safe and healthy New Year!

Sincerely,
Shawn Bissetta
Superintendent of Schools