

February 17, 2021

As we, the School Committee, stated in our last meeting, this has been a year like no other.

This summer Norwell Public Schools were challenged with developing an academic model that would best meet the learning needs of our children given that we were in the middle of a pandemic. There was no research or past models to study. There was no state guidance or state-wide collaboration. Each district has had to go it alone.

The goal of Norwell Public Schools was to develop a model that provided the most in-person instruction possible for students given the health and safety guidelines. We employed a hybrid model with the implementation of the following health and safety protocols:

- Masking and 6 feet distancing
- All ventilation systems have been inspected and repaired
- CO2 sensors have been placed in classrooms to regulate the flow of fresh air
- Filters are now being replaced twice a year
- Sanitizer sprayers are used throughout the buildings on a regular basis
- Cafeteria desks are cleaned between each use and high touch areas are cleaned with a disinfectant spray on a regular basis.
- Hand sanitizer stations are available
- Hand washing stations have been added to the Middle and High School
- We have employed Covid-19 related custodians, floating nurses, and aides to support cleaning, nurse service continuity, and classroom support
- We have a strong collaboration with the Norwell Board of Health Agent and our school nurses for contact tracing and family guidance.

To ensure most of our teachers could teach this year, we also needed to address their childcare challenges. We extended the benefit that teachers' children may attend Norwell Public Schools. This included providing Covid-19 related aides to supervise the teachers' elementary children for their remote schooling in the school's cafeterias so our teachers could be in-person with our children.

We opened schools on Wednesday, September 16th and the district as a whole has remained open since then other than one week when Norwell High School had to go remote. The health and safety protocols have worked. There has been little to no in-school transmission.

Since we began with a model that we had never used before, we expected that there would be elements of the model that worked and there would be elements that would not work. Therefore, we fully expected that adjustments would need to be made especially regarding the students' learning and social and emotional needs and the adjustments would need to be made in real-time to support our students.

While teachers and students have been able to make great strides in school with small classes, and thoughtful use of technology-based communication and learning delivery adaptations, the impact of being in school half the amount of time as in a standard year has had a significant negative impact on most students. One of the greatest challenges has been that students have been required to maintain their learning independently while at home. For the majority of students across the K-12 span, managing their own learning on remote days has resulted in significantly less time spent on learning in general. Most importantly, during the majority of remote days, no time is spent in the kind of meaningful educational engagement with teachers and peers, that has such a valuable impact on learning growth.

We learned in the fall that the high school schedule increased the challenges to our high school students. The challenges were exacerbated by the fact that there were fewer weeks with 3 days of in-person instruction than expected due to Federal holidays and contracted professional days. This provided both a learning challenge to students as well as a challenge in developing a consistent level of work and effort – rhythm to their day and week.

In exploring options to maximize student instructional time we had extensive and lengthy discussion with our teachers union, beginning in November. Thankfully, a much-needed adjustment to the high school schedule will finally be made on February 23rd – over 3 months after the problem was identified.

That brings us to the present. Another thoughtful adjustment needs to be made for all of our students. As we stated in the last meeting, through no fault of anyone connected to Norwell Public Schools, the pandemic and its effect on our children has been devastating. Despite the extraordinary efforts of parents, teachers, administrators and the entire staff to support our children in hybrid and remote instruction, we all know it is not as effective as in person instruction and does not serve the emotional and social needs of growing students.

The social and emotional challenges continue to grow. These are not the clinical mental health issues seen in a usual year. These are issues that are developing because our students are not in school full time. Many parents have observed the following regarding their children:

- They are increasingly losing motivation to both do their work and to go to school
- They are increasingly feeling disconnected, lonely and isolated
- They are more easily overwhelmed
- They are anxiety ridden and short fused
- They have lost their stamina and work ethic.

In a normal school year, our teachers, guidance counselors, and staff would be able to monitor and observe these changes in the social and emotional health of most of our students. But our staff are working with 2 different cohorts and seeing their students in person on a limited basis. These issues are exasperated by the amount of time students spend working independently during the hybrid schedule structure.

The parents are on the front line of these mental health challenges. Parents are trying to help and support their children with these issues. And their concern for their children's social and emotional health has grown exponentially in the last month. The most effective way to address these social and emotional deficits is to return our children to in-person learning. The hybrid model was a good transitional model but it is not a good long-term model for children. It was intended to be used to transition safely back to the full in-person model that our students desperately need. The science, the data, and the updated CDC guidance provide us a path to return our students to full in-person learning. Furthermore, according to the most recent district survey of families, only 5% of the families surveyed would not want their children to return to full in-person.

We have always believed that the job of the School Committee is to work with the administration, the teachers' union, and the community to provide the best learning environment for the students. However, to be completely forthright, the teachers have local, state, and federal unions whose sole mission is to advocate for the needs of their teachers. The Norwell students have this School Committee. As a district, we have always subscribed to our core value of "students first". That continues to be what we use to guide every decision.

Therefore, we are asking the Superintendent to prepare for a target date of March 29, 2021 to return all hybrid students to full in-person learning. We will continue to provide the elementary remote academy for the students and families that need to be remote. We all need to recognize that vaccinating teachers combined with reduced cases in the community and schools are key to finalizing the return date. As a result, we have built in some flexibility around the return date of four weeks from when the vaccinations become available to teachers. We are having constructive conversations with the EAN about flexibility around vaccination schedules.

Although the state has not released the vaccine for Public School staff yet, we believe that the teachers are expected to be able to receive vaccinations well before March 29th. We will continue to update the community on the release of the vaccines and reduced cases in the community on March 1st and March 22nd.

Undoubtedly, there will be challenges for everyone as we transition, students, teachers, staff, and families as well. It will be crucial that parents, teachers and administrators recognize that the shift to an in-person learning model will be an adjustment for students. Due to the pandemic, students have not consistently attended school for a year, many learning habits and life patterns have been disrupted and rearranged. Many adaptations to full in-person learning, such as the adjustment of sleep and wake-up schedules, recalibrating homework expectations, the flow and patterns of pick up and drop off- will call on all of us to be patient, understanding and forgiving as we embark on the change to full in person. Although there will be challenges, this adjustment will give our students greater opportunity to master the curriculum, establish learning routines and experience learning with more connected engagement.

It is important to understand that a return to in-person learning will require more students to be quarantined if there is a positive case in school. With 6 ft. distancing, we have not quarantined students as close contacts unless they were in contact with someone for more than 15 minutes and less than 6 ft. A return to in-person will require clear seating charts and automatic quarantining of students seated within 6 ft.

The transition to full in-person will require everyone to be even more vigilant in mitigating the virus as we move forward. All of us must commit to our mitigation strategies and responsibilities – masking, social distancing, ventilation, cleaning, strong contact tracing, and with full compliance with quarantine procedures. Families must continue to fill out and follow the COVID – Pass attestation and travel guidance.

As a district, we must continue to analyze community and school spread in accordance with state and CDC guidelines. While in an in-person model, we must be prepared to make quick adjustments when and where warranted. It's important that we keep in mind that in person learning, while following our safety procedures, will not be the same as regular school. However, we all must be vigilant in order to keep our children in school.

As we stated, vaccines for teachers are important to the return to full in-person so again, we encourage the community to contact our state officials - State Rep. DeCoste, State Senator O'Connor and Governor Baker to ensure that teachers are vaccinated ASAP. The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends that frontline essential workers, including those who work in the education sector (teachers and school staff), be prioritized for vaccine allocation in phase 1b, following health care personnel and residents of long-term care facilities (phase 1a) which means our Massachusetts teachers should be eligible right now for vaccines. 26 states and DC have already vaccinated or are in the process right now of vaccinating their teachers. Massachusetts has always had one of the nation's top public education systems. It is time for our state leaders to prioritize our children and their education not only in words, but more importantly by taking action and vaccinating our teachers now.