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Votes and Stormy Weather...update! WPS 8-20-21

This morning, I was able to participate in a conference call with MA Education Commissioner Riley where he shared with us his intention to seek authorization from the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) to implement a mask mandate in all MA public schools through October 1, 2021.

If curious, you can access the full press release here:

<https://us14.campaign-archive.com/?u=d8f37d1a90dacd97f207f0b4a&id=f0ff9d37ca>

As noted in the press release:

After October 1, the commissioner's policy would allow middle and high schools to lift the mask mandate for vaccinated students and staff only if the school meets a certain vaccination rate – at least 80 percent of students and staff in a school building are vaccinated. Unvaccinated students and staff would still be required to wear masks.

The mandate would include exceptions for students who cannot wear a mask due to medical conditions or behavioral needs.

The mask mandate will only apply indoors and to children 5 and older.

At this moment, we are still holding our previously scheduled School Co meeting on Tuesday August 24, 2021 in the evening at 7:00pm in the Millenium Building. It seems most likely that at this point that all K-12 students and staff in WPS will be required to wear masks when indoors until October 1.

While I clearly understand that some of our families are very happy about this news and some of our families are very upset about this news, I believe that the specific timeframe and expectation for the school communities to reach the 80% vaccination threshold is very promising for Westford. So, the idea that we will be revisiting this decision very soon also provides a clear timetable for potential changes.

Now that the biggest question on most everyone's minds has been answered, the rest of our students' experiences will be much more similar to what school liked before March 2020. With all of the previous restrictions lifted from DESE, our classrooms will once again become flexible, welcoming environments where students and teachers can expect to collaborate in small groups as they critically think, communicate and create wonderful work. Positive, in-person relationships will be prioritized and begin forming right from the first day of school. After School clubs and activities will be extending our students and teachers abilities to foster those relationships and explore additional opportunities that were not all available last year.

We will continue to communicate the importance of washing hands and using hand sanitizer throughout the day as well as respecting personal spaces and encouraging 3' of distance where possible. As a district, we will be exploring the use of the diagnostic testing made available by the state. The "Test and Stay" option allows parents to give consent for the school to test students identified as close contacts without symptoms and if they test negative they can remain in school. We are still considering whether symptomatic testing for students who develop symptoms while in school would be helpful for our nurses or create an additional burden for them to do their crucial work in our health clinics. We will continue to encourage anyone feeling ill or exhibiting symptoms to stay home and anyone developing symptoms while in school would be sent home unless we decide to implement the symptomatic testing options. Very specific forms from the state detailing the process and requesting parental/guardian consent will be distributed to all of our families before any diagnostic COVID testing takes place.

Principals will be communicating with families sometime after Tuesday with their more typical welcome letters. They will include more school specific information including what lunches and mask breaks will look like in each of our respective schools.

Finally, due to the impending arrival of Henri, all WPS schools and offices will be closed on Monday. Administrative staff will be working remotely. We will notify families planning to participate in the One to World Chromebook distribution scheduled for Monday night (4:30-7:00) on Monday as to whether or not that will still be able to take place.

Stay safe!
Chris

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