



Mr. Thomas W. Giard III
Superintendent of Schools

Mr. Craig C. Powers
Assistant Superintendent

2/10/21 – Update on School District Learning Model

Dear WPS Community,

We continue to monitor public health and district COVID-19 trends regularly to make the most informed and safest decisions we can about our learning models for our five schools. Next week, on Wednesday, February 17, 2021 at 5:00 PM, the Waterford Board of Education and I will meet to discuss our current school learning model and potential plans moving forward. We all share a common goal of returning all students to full in-person learning safely. We can all agree the best learning model is for students to be in school with a teacher and peers. This is a lengthy email but I want to be sure I address our current situation and share information about next steps.

As we have throughout the entire process from last spring through the entirety of this school year, we have utilized the expert guidance and recommendations from a multitude of public health and medical experts. As this has been a public health and medical crisis, we have remained in continual contact with officials from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE); the CT Department of Public Health (CT DPH); the Office of the State Epidemiologist; Ledge Light Health District (LLHD); and our District Medical Advisor. This communication loop has been the same process each district around the state has used to make informed and safe decisions. It is one we will continue to employ moving forward.

As you know, we have remained in our hybrid learning model throughout the winter based on the recommendations of these experts. CSDE and CT DPH guidance to Superintendents and Boards of Education ask that we consult with the local health district to make decisions about learning models and proposed changes. To date, Ledge Light Health District has recommended that Waterford remain in the hybrid model. To date, we have followed that recommendation. As the pandemic has evolved, so too has the research and guidance from these entities. Next week, I will be presenting a plan to the Board of Education about a phased-in approach to a return of full in-person learning PK-8. I will also be presenting a plan for WHS that maintains the hybrid model but increases in-person learning time in the building utilizing Wednesdays. This proposed plan is supported by both Ledge Light Health District and our District Medical Advisor and is in alignment with the latest guidance from the CDC and CT DPH.

Many of you have asked why Waterford has remained in hybrid when some other towns, even within the Ledge Light Health District region, have been in full-in person learning or recently returned to full-in person learning. The short answer is that Waterford's COVID-19 positive case metrics have significantly outpaced other towns. Waterford's daily positive case rate has been the second or third highest in the region for many weeks this fall and winter. The two-week rolling count of new cases for Waterford has been very high and outside of New London and Groton, two much bigger towns, we have been the highest in this region amongst towns our size. These numbers have had an impact on our decision thus far. We continue to monitor in-district cases and contact trace in order to determine any in-school transmission.

There is good news in this area as we have seen some downward trends in positive cases in the region; within Waterford; and within the school district. Our hope is these positive downward trends continue as we plan next steps in our learning model.

There are two other components which impact our decisions on our learning model.

Secondly, we continue to examine our ability to meet the core COVID-19 mitigation strategies as outline in our August 2020 Reopening Plan. We are doing a really good job in this area. We have been very compliant and diligent in following these strategies. Our cleaning protocols and building ventilation are excellent. Physical plant features regarding classrooms and other building features vary by building but are not prohibiting us at this time based on current cohort numbers. We are planning and monitoring our ability to meet the core mitigation strategies at increased capacity.

The third factor is our ability to safely staff the schools. This has been a daily challenge since November as staff continue to be quarantined and isolated due to in-school and out-of-school cases. As you see from the regular emails sent out on cases in our schools, a full contact tracing process is conducted on each one of these cases. When staff are deemed close contacts they are quarantined. This presents challenging staffing situations and we have had to close schools; teams; and grade levels. Due to being in the hybrid model with reduced student counts on any given day, it has allowed flexibility within buildings and across schools which is decreased if all-in. As cases in the community and region decrease, staffing challenges should be less of an issue.

To summarize, our goal is to safely return to full-in person learning and the Board of Education and I will be discussing all of this next Wednesday, February 17th at 5:00 PM at a special Board of Education meeting. I will be sharing the latest guidance and recommendation from the experts as well as potential next steps in our learning model.

As is the case with every Board of Education meeting, public comment from parents and community members can be submitted and included as part of the record. Every Board of Education member also receives a copy of every public comment submitted. Due to the virtual format of the meeting, all questions/comments can be submitted via email to cwhittaker@waterfordschools.org by noon on February 17, 2021.

The special Board of Education meeting on February 17th can be viewed on the BOE YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7hhqBh6eoFpZjYCtoSxsTA/videos> and agendas are posted on the online platform [BoardDocs](#).

Please feel free to contact me prior to the meeting or after if I can provide any additional information. I will follow up with another email to the community after the meeting on February 17th outlining the full plan.

My best and be well,
Tom

Thomas W. Giard III
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