

## Mayor's Update

### A Decision on Reopening Schools this Fall

This afternoon, the School Committee (of which I am a member) voted 7 to 2 to reopen schools in September by providing parents and caregivers flexibility in deciding what is best for their family while making accommodations for our teachers and staff. The educators at the Newton Public Schools and the Newton School Committee adopted this model after consulting with leading public health experts, implementing health and safety practices across our school system, and paying close attention to the input of our families, teachers and students.



Key aspects of Newton's plan include:

- Parents and caregivers can choose *either* to have their students attend school in-person two mornings a week with online, distance learning for the other parts of the school week (a.k.a., the hybrid model) *or* to have their students attend school completely online (a.k.a., the distance learning academy)
- Any student who is determined to be "high need" will be able to attend school in-person four or five days a week
- All teachers who are at high risk for COVID-19 can teach remotely
- All students will be provided with a computer device and, if needed, a WiFi access hotspot device
- All students will have "Grab and Go" lunches available daily
- Extensive health and safety policies and procedures will be in place in the school buildings, including 6 feet of distancing in the classrooms, face covering requirements, hand hygiene protocols, air circulation/exchange/filtration measures, shifting use of space/classrooms so interior spaces are not used for teaching, enhanced cleaning, plenty of PPE, policies and procedures for access to testing, contact tracing, quarantining and isolating, and daily health self-assessments
- Improvements are being made for walking and biking to school, while bus transportation with physical distancing will be provided

There are many factors that led us to this approach for starting the school year in September.

Thanks to so many of us being so careful for so long and reinventing how we live, work, shop and recreate, Massachusetts and Newton currently have low levels of transmission and low positivity rates for COVID-19. That essential fact allows us to offer some in-person teaching and learning.

Health and safety considerations led us to only *partial* in-person teaching and learning. All of us – teachers and educators, parents and caregivers, and students – would prefer to be in-person in our school buildings full time. We know that's best for the social and emotional health of our children, for equitable schooling, and for academic excellence.

But, with COVID-19 still circulating, we know that 6 feet of physical distancing is important. This requirement means that only 50% of the students can be in a classroom at a time. Thus, we needed a hybrid approach with half the students learning at home at any given time with the other half present in the buildings with their teachers in-person.

Another key consideration was to increase significantly the time that students who are at home learning online have with their teachers and classmates “live” (i.e., synchronous) over the internet. We found this past spring that our children struggled with too many assignments and homework to do independently. Thus, we needed our teachers to be available in-person in the buildings for some of the day as well as available over the computer and online for other parts of the day. Our goal was to ensure every student every day would be with their teacher(s) “live.”

This led our NPS staff to develop the split hybrid model of two mornings a week that students would be in the school buildings for in-person learning.

Let me give an example to help clarify. A 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, for example, will be with half the students in the school on Monday/Tuesday mornings and the other half on Thursday/Friday mornings. In the afternoons, this classroom teacher will have structured time with the students who are distance learning on that particular day. Other teachers and staff will provide instruction and support (e.g., librarians, art, music, specialists, aides) when students are in distance learning and on Wednesdays (when all students will be learning at home). This model also avoids the health and safety complications of having students eating together (which would require them to remove face coverings and distance further) by having “grab and go” lunches for students to take home at approximately 12:30.

Students with disabilities, particularly preschool-age students and those with significant and complex needs, will be prioritized for receiving in-person instruction. These students will receive as much in-person instruction as feasible within the health and safety parameters in effect.

Parents and caregivers can also choose all distance learning for their children if that fits their needs. These students will be part of the NPS Distance Learning Academy (DLA). The NPS Distance Learning Academy will use a variety of teaching and learning platforms (e.g., Edgenuity) and NPS staff to provide high quality learning. DLA will include a wide variety of offerings as well as connections to classmates.

We know how challenging this is for everyone. As soon as we can pivot to all in-person education with the appropriate health and safety protocols, we will. For this fall, we know that parents and caregivers will have their children at home the vast majority of time, making it hard to work outside the home or even at home. Teachers will have to be able to teach effectively in-person and online even as they juggle their personal responsibilities. While risk is mitigated a lot, we know we will have positive COVID-19 cases.

As a caring community that is using science and data to inform our decisions, my vote on how to resume teaching and learning involved answering a slew of questions. The most fundamental one for me boiled down to this: Can we provide the incredibly valuable in-person education that our kids need while sufficiently mitigating health risks for our children, our teachers and staff, and our community? The answer for me is yes.

With a lot of guidance from medical experts and with a lot of investment of time and resources to make adjustments to our practices and policies and buildings, we are well positioned to do partial in-person learning in our school buildings responsibly.

If our continuous tracking of metrics such as the transmission of COVID-19 and positivity rates indicate a need to change track, we will move quickly to all distance learning for everyone. Public health data and the advice of experts will inform our decision making.

Furthermore, we will adapt if needed based on the results of our parent and teacher/staff surveys next week. We have a strong framework in place for the hybrid learning model and now we need to gather information and make detailed staffing and classroom plans on a student by student, teacher by teacher, and school by school basis.

Typically, mid-August is a time of excitement for our families as they happily imagine the start of the new school year. This year, all of us are approaching it with anxiety and nervousness. Families will soon have to choose the hybrid or all distance model for their children and that decision may be difficult for some. Others may not have the luxury of choosing because of their personal circumstances.

Let's be supportive of each other in the days ahead as empathy and kindness will be an essential antidote to the anxiety and trepidation.

I know our teachers and staff will deliver our very best version of a COVID-19 education so that we fulfill our mission of academic excellence, social and emotional support, and equitable teaching and learning.

Let's double down on actions we can take – face coverings, hand hygiene, physical distancing – so we keep COVID-19 as much at bay as possible and thus allow as much in-person teaching and learning as feasible. We have both a shared responsibility and a lot of personal responsibility in this strange and complicated period. Together, I'm hopeful we'll do our very best.

Warmly,

Ruthanne

P.S. Test results received today show the water quality at Crystal Lake has returned to safe levels for people and pets. You can find the results [here](#).

