



## **Franklin Public Schools**

*Office of the Superintendent  
355 East Central Street; Suite 3  
Franklin, Massachusetts 02038  
Phone: 508-553-4819*

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### **Superintendent's Report to School Committee November 9, 2020 School Committee Meeting**

#### **Updated Health Metrics and Governor's Statement from Friday, November 6, 2020**

As you likely know, the Department of Public Health and Governor's office adjusted the health metrics on Friday. These metrics have been adjusted to take into account the size of the community and the percent positivity of testing. The effect has been to change the way communities are identified for risk and Franklin is now again listed in the green, or lower risk, category. Across the state, this has reduced the number of red and yellow communities; there are more gray and green communities this week despite an increase in cases across the state.

As part of this message, the Governor and Commissioner of Education adjusted the state's expectations of learning models based on the new color coding of the metrics. To summarize:

- **Districts and schools in communities designated gray, green, or yellow are expected to have students learning fully in-person, if feasible.** A hybrid model should be used only if there is no other way to meet health and safety requirements.
- **Schools in red communities should implement hybrid models, while maximizing in-person learning time for high-needs students.**
- **Fully remote instructional models should be implemented only as a last resort.**

The word feasible is an important one.

Four practical matters come immediately to mind when I think about feasibility of being full and in person: distancing, staffing, transportation, and personnel relations/collective bargaining. As part of the reopening plan, we had discussed what in person learning could look like but we have also learned a lot about in person instruction since that was developed mid-August. Due to feasibility factors, we continue to recommend a hybrid instructional model.

#### **Halloween Party, Return to Remote, and COVID-19 Testing for Athletes and Performers**

First, I want to apologize to the numerous parents/guardians and students who reached out via phone or e-mail last week. There have been far too many communications to respond to individually. As an administrative team, we decided to respond collectively in a few statements to keep the community informed. Mr. Hanna and Mr. Angelo, however, did communicate with the Captains, coaches, and theatre advisors directly during the period of greatest, heightened concern.

Second, I'd like to share some rationale for the decisions we made and discuss what may also happen in the future.

First, the return to remote was one that was very reluctantly made. So very much work has gone into creating the hybrid structure at Franklin High School and, on an emotional level, we are so excited to welcome students back into the building. The decision to be remote was one that was made cautiously and in consultation with DESE and our local health department, who supported it. Our primary concern from the party was that there was a large gathering, health and safety practices were not in place, and we were unable to identify a large number of attendees. Some have argued that parties are happening a lot in town and we were responding to but one. In this case, the party was broken up by police, we had confirmation, and had to take action. I would implore the community, however, to not turn a blind eye to the idea that there will be parties in town. The Governor has placed greater restrictions on indoor and outdoor gatherings out of concern with these events being the place where the virus is spreading. PLEASE be good neighbors to each other - do not host these gatherings and work together to prevent others from doing the same.

Indeed, we have health and safety practices in place such as mask wearing, hand hygiene, and physical distancing and these practices are in place in the event that someone may be in our school setting with COVID-19. I think this is an important and valid point. The health and safety practices are making a difference in stopping the spread of the virus. As it relates to FHS, the school has not had much practice with this in the hybrid setting. We had concerns about bringing a potential cluster into the school environment and the Health Department and DESE supported this. Additionally, we responded consistently to what other communities had done at that time. Going forward, would we make the same decision? Perhaps. We will evaluate the facts of each case, again consulting with the local health department and DESE. We are constantly learning more about the virus and how to reduce exposure. We are also keenly aware of the social emotional toll our students are facing; we have heard from numerous sources how stressed our high school students are, in particular, and we do need to respond.

We felt and continue to feel terrible at the thought that the many students at FHS were being punished for the behavior of a few. We saw an opportunity to test students for COVID -- not in a diagnostic way but rather as a screener given that the Health Department supported outdoor activities. We didn't know to what scale we would be able to test. Testing the varsity athletes and theatre performers seemed like a reasonable pilot. Varsity athletes were prioritized so that they could conclude the sports season, especially with our seniors in mind. Theatre performers were also tested so that they could continue to work towards an outdoor production that had been scheduled and was somewhat time sensitive. While we would have loved to have done more testing, we didn't feel we had the capability to test JV and freshmen athletes or the numerous students participating in clubs and activities. Additionally, we felt that these activities, while a loss in the current weeks, still allow for future participation by students.

Would we test again in a similar circumstance? Perhaps. Timing played a role in our decision. If it had been earlier in the season, we may not choose to go through the same steps if there were still weeks of a season left to play or opportunity to reschedule an event. On the other hand, it is my sincere hope that additional screening opportunities are developed for schools so that testing can be conducted regularly as a measure of keeping the virus under control and schools open. We are currently exploring different avenues and will be in touch with our families and stadd with more information if a testing program can be developed.

### **Visiting Author at Franklin Middle School**

Last year, for the first time, our middle school reading specialists brought a visiting author to all three middle school students in Franklin. A grant from the FEF allowed us to pursue this opportunity and develop materials and procedures that could be replicated at each of the three middle schools. Leslie Connor visited November 13-15, 2019.

They applied for the grant once again and received funding to offset the cost of a visiting author for 2020. This month, they will welcome YA author Jordan Sonnenblick. All three schools hosted an online book fair with *An Unlikely Story* as well as a virtual Stop Drop and Read Day (last Wednesday) so every single student could access his highly engaging books before his visit. Next week, he will spend three days (virtually) in Franklin - he will present to the entire student body as well as host both a small group writing workshop and book club-style discussion.

Obviously, the challenges this year have resulted in them translating this event to the virtual realm. They strongly believe in the power of this author to transcend a virtual medium and connect with our kids. He came to HMMS in person three years ago and the staff and former students rave about him still! A message from the reading specialists, "This is the year to encourage our students to grow into readers, this is the year to encourage parents to spend time with their children away from a screen. This is the year to encourage our kids to think beyond themselves and give them books that can be both a window and a mirror."

Sonnenblick's books are highly engaging and popular with our adolescent readers. They are realistic fiction stories about kids dealing with unexpected challenges. From a parent's divorce, to a brother's cancer diagnosis, to a grandfather's struggle with dementia, to a career-ending baseball injury, Sonnenblick shows our students that they are more than the sum of what happens in their lives. We don't have control over what happens to us - but we do have control over how we respond. We are better than our worst day.

We look forward to welcoming this author to HMMS, ASMS, and RMS November 18-20, 2020. The three reading specialists will also host an evening event with the author November 19 at 7pm. This will be available via a livestream for all Franklin middle school families and interested guests. A digital invitation is forthcoming.

This is jointly funded by an FEF grant as well as our middle school budgets, and PCCs.

### **FHS Chamber**

Franklin High School performers showcased their talents through a Chamber Concert last week.

The next Chamber event will be Thursday, December 10.

### **National Blue Ribbon School Awards Ceremony**

Dr. Ashley and I will be representing the John F. Kennedy Elementary School and Franklin Public Schools this Friday at a virtual award ceremony with the US Department of Education. Kennedy is one of 367 schools being recognized as a Blue Ribbon School this year. Kennedy is being recognized for exemplary gap closing measures.