

Good afternoon,

I am writing to let you know that after meeting and talking with the leadership team at the Diocesan Office of Education, our St. Mary Admin Team, and the teachers of 3rd-grade--along with lots of prayerful discernment and research, **I have decided to phase our 3rd-graders back on campus beginning Monday, October 12th**--if they choose to return for in-person instruction.

While the COVID-19 statistics and metrics for Spokane County are well beyond the level that would allow for the reopening of in-person instruction to more students at this time, the rationale for this decision has multiple factors:

1. Our 3rd-grade is very small. Currently, the enrollment is **10**.
2. A 3rd-grade return does not impact current classroom use, teaching location, or any other facet of our COVID configuration with the exception of the playground arrangement for recess and PE.
3. 3rd-grade is currently being taught by a substitute teacher. With all due respect to Mrs. Caroline Gant (who is doing an incredible job--all things considered), a substitute teacher is simply not as comfortable with the curriculum, students, or the remote delivery system we have put in place. In-person instruction will improve this dynamic immensely.
4. Children 9 years old and under are at lesser risk of contracting and transmitting COVID-19.
5. Ages 0-9 account for 3.9% of total COVID-19 cases in Spokane County.
6. Younger children are more vulnerable in a distance learning model due to technological aptitude.
7. Younger children are unable to stay at home while parents are at work.

Furthermore, I am confident the success of our phased approach thus far is also a strong indicator of our ability to welcome 10 more students on site safely.

Finally, let me be clear. This decision was made by the St. Mary school administration and me based on our unique situation and the factors I listed above. This discussion has been happening since I published our reopening letter in August, and nothing about this decision was dictated by parental pressure.

Rest assured, we are constantly evaluating the COVID situation, the decision tree metrics, and the needs of our students—at home and on campus. Sadly, the case numbers are trending the wrong direction currently, but I, along with the admin team, am also trying to be flexible and

creative about bringing more students on site while simultaneously balancing the safety and well-being of our students and staff.

Other than our soft-start week, we've been in school for 12 days. Hopefully, declining case numbers and a continued successful phased approach will allow us to bring more students back on site soon.

Let me know if you have questions or concerns.

In Christ,

Ben

Ben Walker
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