

August 2020

Dear St. Mary Families and Friends,

I want to thank you all for your patience, understanding, and support as we have navigated a reopening process that has no precedent to study. As you know, we have put together a comprehensive reopening plan, complete with measures and protocols to ensure the safety of each member of our community to the best of our abilities. We have also designed an enhanced “real-time” distance learning program in the event that we need to employ such a model.

After weeks of prayerful discernment and meaningful dialogue with the diocesan leadership team, school pastors, local administrators, teachers and the administration of St. Mary, and in consultation with the Spokane Regional Health Department (SRHD), St. Mary Catholic School will adopt a progressive *phase-in* model for the 2020-2021 school year offering in-person instruction to a portion of its students. This phased approach prioritizes students in greatest need for in-person learning and children with special health or education needs first.

In accordance with the Washington State Department of Health’s “Decision Tree for Provision of in Person among Public and Private K-12 Students During COVID-19”, St. Mary Catholic School will be implementing the following measures for reopening, which have been endorsed by the diocesan Office of Education and Bishop Daly:

- Preschool through 2nd grade will receive in-person instruction on our campus full-time under our reopening plan protocols.
- 3rd grade through 8th grade will begin the year in a distance learning model and will be phased into in-person instruction on our campus.
 - The phasing timeline for the entry of these grades will be determined by the guidelines of the aforementioned “Decision Tree”.
 - The benchmark needed to reach in order for these grades to return to on-campus instruction would be 25-75 cases per 100K residents in Spokane County over a 14 day period. Spokane County is currently experiencing 214 cases per 100K residents.

The rationale for this decision had multiple factors:

- The COVID-19 statistics and metrics for Spokane County are beyond the level that would allow for full reopening of in-person instruction.
- Children 9 years old and under are at lesser risk of contracting and transmitting COVID-19.
- Ages 0-9 account for 3.9% of total COVID-19 cases in Spokane County as of August 11th.

- Younger children are more vulnerable in a distance learning model due to technological aptitude.
- Younger children are unable to stay at home while parents are at work.
 - We know that childcare is still a need for students older than 2nd. However, SRHD is only comfortable with a small number of students entering the building to begin the year, and the priority has been given to the youngest of our population.

Additionally, the diocese has made the following decision regarding the first day of instruction:

- The diocesan schools have collectively decided to adjust their start dates. Therefore, St. Mary will begin instruction on **September 14th** to allow time to shift to a school with two models happening within the same building according to grade levels and give our students and families time to get acquainted with any new digital platforms.
 - K-2nd grade will begin on-campus instruction September 14th
 - 3rd-8th grade will begin distance learning September 14th.
 - Preschool will begin on September 1st as per the original school calendar.
 - We will be looking at removing monthly teacher in-service days in our calendar to prevent having to extend the school year into the summer.

Actions to be taken prior to September 14th:

- Small groups of K-8 grade students and parents will be scheduled to come into school to meet with their teacher and discuss class details. This is especially important for 3rd-8th grade students in order to set up distance learning platforms and familiarize students with these digital platforms and protocols. We also hope to complete assessments during this “soft start” during the week of Sept. 8-11. A detailed plan and schedule will be disseminated at a later date.
- I will offer an online (live-streamed) informational evening on Wednesday, August 19th at 6:00 to answer questions and address concerns. A link will be sent out next week.
- After-school Educare plans and protocols will be established and shared with the community next week.

I have received requests from parents in our community to disobey any decision from SRHD that does not allow all of our students to be on campus. To that, I offer you the most sincere and honest answer I can, which is that I simply cannot in good conscience contradict advice from our medical officials. I take the safety of our students and employees, as well as their extended families, too seriously to

knowingly disobey the advice from those who know far more than me on these matters. I would be negligent to do so. There are those who will argue that our school would not be held legally liable, and this is likely true, but that is beyond the point. I can see no way that I would not be morally and ethically negligent if I were to put our community at risk by going against the health department's recommendations.

Therefore, I accept the health department's guidelines. I will welcome and appreciate the entry of our Pre/K-2nd grade students, and I will look forward to a safe process of phasing in additional grades in a manner that is responsible and medically approved. I will actively wait with great anticipation for the day our school is full of all of our students once again. In the meantime, St. Mary will deliver an outstanding in-person educational experience to our young learners and a robust distance learning program to our older students.

As always, I am available to hear your concerns and field your questions. I greatly empathize with the challenges and constraints not opening to the entire school creates for families and children. I am walking the same path with two children in Catholic schools at home. My door remains wide open to every member of this amazing community as you and your family navigate this difficult time. We are in this together!

Thank you again for your support and understanding.

In Christ,

Ben Walker
Principal,
St. Mary Catholic School