



St. Gregory the Great Academy

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 7, 2020

TO: All Parents, Faculty, and Staff

FROM: Dr. Jason C. Briggs, Principal

RE: **Return to School Update #1**

Good afternoon to all. This is the first of what I intend to be regular updates regarding the return to school at the end of the summer. I plan to send these updates as significant milestones are reached and plans start to come into focus for various areas of school life as we look toward opening school in these times. I will start by saying that nothing can be carved in stone. Anything that I state in these updates can change due to the nature of the challenges that we face. This is perhaps the first thing that we must all learn to deal with – **there are no longer any guarantees that what we plan to happen is what is going to happen.** True, this has always been the case; however, the frequency with which situations change rapidly has increased significantly since March. It is not going to slow down any time soon. We will need to adapt, at times with little warning. This is unsettling to many people, and we need to acknowledge this fact. The uncertainty triggers anxiety in me both as a parent and a principal; this is going to be a fact of life for a while. Nonetheless, despite the uncertainty planning must continue. Thus, below please find current thoughts on a variety of areas.

As I mentioned previously, our overall approach is best described as "in-person instruction with extreme social distancing, or as I have super creatively entitled **IPIWESD**. As you may know, the document published by the New Jersey Department of Education provides wide latitude for schools to address the challenges of COVID-19. New Jersey's schools vary greatly across the landscape, and the guidance outlines some minimum standards and then contains many recommendations to implement if feasible in a school. Governor Murphy's requirement is that schools reopen in "some physical fashion." This leaves the possibility for schools to physically reopen for only some students, or to reduce the physical population on particular days. This can be accomplished by scheduling school in "split sessions" or "alternating days." Of course, I considered this option for us at St. Gregory, but deemed it not feasible based on the percentage of our families who rely on their children being at school in order to go to work. As a result, IPIWESD seems to be the most feasible path forward for our community.



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Of course, before I go any further, I would like to make it clear that the overarching consideration for all decision making is the health and well-being of our students and staff. All other considerations are secondary. My planning and decision making is rooted in two important documents, namely [Consideration for Schools](#) published by the Center for Disease Control and [COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry](#) published by the American Academy of Pediatrics. One of the messages in these documents is another of those facts we might not want to acknowledge but must – **we cannot eliminate risk; our goal is to reduce risk to the lowest degree possible.** This is a fact that naysayers often fail to understand. For example, have you ever heard someone lament that there is no value in cleaning a handrail because the next person who touches it may be ill and recontaminate the rail? A person looking to eliminate risk would use this scenario to determine periodic cleaning is futile. A person looking to reduce risk would use this scenario to support periodic cleaning because such cleaning realistically cuts down the chances of disease spread even though it does not reduce the chance to zero. This is a very important distinction, and it is informing decisions that I am making and plans that are being put into place. Remember that all actions carry some risk; key to the decision to participate in an action needs to be what level of risk you are willing to accept AND what risks are you exposed to if you take no action. The AAP publication does an excellent job of explaining this concept, much better than I.

I know that the preceding paragraphs are wordy (which I am sure is a complete surprise to all who know me...), but I believe it is necessary to know the source of data that is informing decision making. **I am not an epidemiologist or a scientist, so I must rely on being informed by those who spend their lives studying these areas.** Naysayers may say that these individuals are not credible because the guidance changes, and sometimes frequently. To this, I would respond that this is the nature of science and medicine. Again, I have no training in the sciences, but I am married to someone who does. As a result, I have come to accept that we are experiencing medicine being practiced in real-time. At this time, social distancing is widely considered to be the only effective way to combat COVID-19 by reducing (again, not eliminating) the risk. Hence, our path forward with the IPIWESD approach.

At this time, here are some specifics that are planned at this time:

1. Reducing the number of students in one place as frequently as possible is desirable. Students will be separated into three homerooms in Grades K-8, with the exception of Grade 6 which will have four homerooms. Preschool 4 will have two separate classes in separate rooms, while Preschool 3 students will be all together due to a sparse enrollment. Students in each grade will also be separated into two, three, or four "cohorts," depending on the number of students in that grade. Cohorts are a different mix of students in the same grade and allow special programs to be administered for particular students. Thus, each student will be a member of a "homeroom" and a "cohort." This has long been the practice in Grades 5-8; however, we will now be extending this system down through Grade 1 in order to allow for smaller groups as often as possible. Virtually all students will spend the entire day in one or two classrooms; when students need to move to a different class for cohort classes it will always be a room exclusively used by students in the same grade. **It will be the teachers who will be changing classes instead of the students.** Lunch will be taken in the homeroom; aside from restroom and handwashing time, students will leave the classrooms for outdoor recess (at staggered times), outdoor physical education class (when possible), and the use of any outdoor learning areas that we are able to set up (again, at staggered times).

2. This year we will be minimizing the materials that will be transported between home and school in order to reduce the risk that this vector can expose both home and school to germs present in the other location. Each student will be issued a canvas bag (similar to the “switch bags” that Grades 3 and 4 have used for several years) which will be where they store all materials that will be used in school and which will stay in school. **Backpacks will not be used.** Students will be able to bring lunches, of course, as well as a small pouch/purse as needed for personal items. Chromebooks in cases will also be able to be brought between home and school for the grades that they are issued to. In reading the guidance, it is suggested that we minimize the sharing of supplies and to clean any supplies used before they are given to another student. Operationally, this cleaning would very time-consuming. **Therefore, we will be “issuing” supplies to all students in the school that will be kept in school and not be brought home.** It will be up to the parents to provide the supplies needed at home. Please do not go out and purchase backpacks or school supplies for school; the supplies issued by the school will be the ones that will be kept in school for use. Students in each grade will receive a bill for the cost of the provided supplies, as this situation was not foreseen when the school budget was developed.
3. Books are another concern in terms of back and forth transport. As a result, teachers will decide if each book should be kept at school or at home. For example, if a book is to be kept in school, should the children need to use material from that book the teacher will scan and upload the page(s) to Google Classroom.
4. The use of masks/PPE, handwashing/sanitizing, and temperature checks will all be implemented to the best of our ability based on New Jersey guidance and the documents I referenced earlier. **Masks will be an absolute requirement for all adults in the building, and for all students from the moment they gather with their class in the morning until they are in their classrooms. It is understood that students in Grades 3 and below may have significant issues with keeping their masks on all day in the classroom, and these students will be encouraged to wear their masks as frequently as possible when they are not more than 6 feet away from other students. Students in Grades 4 and up will be required (not encouraged) to wear their masks when they are not more than 6 feet away from other students.** No students will be required to wear masks during recess play, physical education class time, and any other time of physical exertion. I am sorry if you do not agree, but we will have to agree to disagree. We have immunocompromised students and staff in our school, and none of us have the right to gamble with their well-being.

That is all for this update. I know there are likely many, many more questions that are on your mind at this time. Some things are coming into better focus, while others are still to be sorted out. As more procedures are determined and I have more to share with you, be assured it will come to you. There is a rainbow of opinions on many of the issues related to reopening school. Many of you have shared your thoughts with me, and I respect each one (even the ones that I do not agree with OR which are not feasible.) I recognize that there will likely be a good number of people who will not agree with 100% of our plan and/or procedures. If you fall into this category, I ask that you keep two things in mind: 1) Our plans are not being made in isolation – the guidance that I am using is linked right in this memo, and 2) I consider it my role to protect every child in our school as my own to the best of my ability, even if only two of them are related to me by blood.

Thank you.