



St. Gregory the Great Academy

A Ministry of the Church of St. Gregory the Great

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 16, 2020

TO: All Parents, Faculty, and Staff

FROM: Dr. Jason C. Briggs, Principal

RE: **Return to School Update #3**

We are a few hours past the mid-point of July, and it seems like every time an answer to a question comes into focus, two new questions emerge. Nonetheless, I would like to share the following current updates with you. Again, these are all with the caveat that every plan is subject to change based on emerging conditions.

As you probably know, various school districts are in the process of releasing their plans for reopening school. Locally, many plans are based on limiting capacity of the buildings by using alternating day or week plans. The places that are making these plans have their reasons, and it is not my place to comment on situations that I do not know the facts about. At this point, however, I remain confident that we will be able to open school using a five full-day schedule for all grade levels. The reasons that support my confidence are:

- 1- The ability we have to utilize a significant amount of space within our buildings. While the temporary learning spaces will not be glamorous or appear on the cover of *Schoolhouse Today* magazine, they will be safe, functional, and most importantly allow us to thin the concentration of students in one place.
- 2- We have several points of entrance/exit for our buildings. We do not have to get everyone through the front door and up the same sets of stairs each day.
- 3- We have a good deal of outdoor space, which I plan to leverage for some outdoor classes and lunchtime as conditions permit.



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It is for these reasons that I do not believe it is necessary for us to use alternating days/weeks or to stagger arrivals and departures AT THIS TIME. Unfortunately, I have to reserve the right to implement these more drastic measures as time goes on if the need arises. When the weather turns colder, we may have no choice. If infection rates increase, we may have no choice. Planning for November at this point, however, is just not productive. My short-term goal is to get everyone into in-person instruction as safely as possible for as long as possible. I am under no illusion that we are guaranteed that staggering, split sessions, and remote instruction will not need to be implemented at our school; in all transparency, I ask that you also recognize that I cannot guarantee that more disruptive procedures will not be needed at some point.

To this end, below are some important points/updates. Please note for the purposes of clarity, items will now be numbered in continuation from previous updates.

- 7- **Remote instruction for individuals** – There may be families who are not comfortable sending their children for in-person instruction. I will be issuing a policy for Elective Remote Instruction in the near future. Essentially, if a family decides that they do not wish to send their children to school for in-person instruction while school is open for in-person instruction we will have the ability to provide **synchronous** home instruction. In short, this will require students to sign in to Google Classroom every day for their classes according to their schedule. We will NOT be purchasing fancy and expensive cameras for the classrooms; we will use a simple setup of a computer or Chromebook camera to broadcast. The best comparison that I can give would be the Google Meets that we had during remote instruction, just with the teacher and the other students in school and full class time each day according to the school schedule. Elective Remote Instruction will need to be scheduled and approved by me to ensure that the minimum requirements for home are in place and that the parents understand the home responsibilities. Again, a detailed policy will be forthcoming.

- 8- **Student homerooms, cohorts, and clustering** – At this point, there is wide consensus that social distancing and reducing contact with others is a sound practice to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Remember, every step we take is designed to REDUCE risk, as we cannot ELIMINATE risk. To this end, several risk-reducing procedures will be in place. First, in reading the guidance I have come to accept that the periods of greatest risk in school will be arrival, snack time, lunch, and dismissal. These will be the time that distancing becomes most difficult (arrival and dismissal) or masks become unusable (eating snack or lunch). Thus, every effort has been made to reduce the size of **homerooms** because this is where all four of these things occur. Grades K-8 will be in either 3 or 4 homeroom sections, depending on size. Preschool will be separated as the enrollment comes into better focus. There will also be times when students at each grade level will be in **grade-level cohorts**. In the K-4 grade levels, for example, even though there are three homerooms there may be only two teachers who will be teaching Math. In this case, the students in that grade will “cohort” into two groups for Math class. In a perfect world, I would have unlimited resources and space to hire as many teachers as I would like, but the reality is that this situation requires creativity and flexibility. Still, in this example, Math class is a lower risk activity than eating lunch. This is why it still makes sense to create smaller homerooms even if the numbers need to be slightly larger for some other classes. In Grades 5-8, cohorting will continue as it normally has based on best meeting student academic needs. Moving from homeroom to cohort will require minimal movement for the students; however, in all cases, they will move only to rooms used by other students in that same grade. Every classroom will only be used by students of the same grade level, and movement will only occur when there needs to be a change from homeroom groups to cohort groups among the same grade. **Clustering** is a much

more complex process. Homeroom placements (again, the place where the highest risk activities take place) have been designed using “clusters.” What this means is that siblings across grade levels have been placed in the same homerooms at that grade level. For example, if 3 students in KC have 4th grade siblings, all 3 of those siblings are also in the same 4th grade homeroom. The purpose of this is to reduce the risk of sibling spread being an efficient vector of virus transmission. If a child in a homeroom becomes infected and somehow spreads the infection to his/her homeroom, any siblings of students in that homeroom who are in other grades will only be in one homeroom (instead of 2 or 3). It is certainly not a perfect plan, but it is another step to reduce risk. It will also be an important tool for contact tracing. All of this being said, the primary factor driving homeroom placement was clustering. I created, without a doubt, the largest most colorful spreadsheet in my life. I appreciate the importance of who likes who and how much students want to be with their friends, but this year all of those concerns are secondary to reducing risk. (Translation – when the homeroom lists come out, please do not email me about placements or ask for a change.)

9- **Bus transportation** – As you may have read, bus transportation is a big issue all over the state. Now, even in a normal year, nonpublic bus transportation is a complicated issue. The state provides the district that you live in a set dollar amount (\$1,000.00) per pupil for transportation of each nonpublic student, subject to some mileage restrictions. Districts may not legally exceed this amount per pupil for nonpublic busing, though there is no limit for public students. In districts where we have many students residing, the district pools this allowance and puts a bus route out to bid. The district may only accept bids that are at or below \$1,000.00 times the number of students on the bus route. For example, if there are 20 students on the route, by state law the maximum cost of a successful bid could be \$1,000.00 x 20, or \$20,000.00. If no bus companies bid on a route, then the bus is not provided. As long as the bid is put out, the public district has fulfilled its legal responsibility. In districts where we have few students residing, there is no chance that the \$1,000.00 per pupil will come close to a bid amount. In the event that a bus route is not provided, the district pays what is called “aid-in-lieu” to the parents of students who qualify for transportation but do not have a route picked up to transport them. So, this is normally a very complicated process to begin with, and this year has added three more complications that I am sharing for your awareness:

- a. Reducing the number of students on a bus will likely make many nonpublic routes nonstarters. The maximum permitted number of students on a bus because of COVID-19 times \$1,000.00 will make any route nonprofitable for the bus company and therefore there will be no bids.
- b. The increased number of bus routes needed to transport public school students (for which there is no limit on the cost per pupil) may not leave enough physical capacity for bus companies to bid on nonpublic routes.
- c. If a school district elects to not provide busing for their public school students, they are no longer required to provide busing for nonpublic students AND are no longer required to pay aid-in-lieu.

10- **Screening and quarantining** – I have received some questions on this topic, as you might imagine. At this time, it is my intention that temperature checks WILL be conducted on all staff and students each day. It is my hope that parents will temperature check students prior to leaving for school each day in order to avoid discovering a fever at arrival; however, we will still be conducting these checks. If a child becomes ill during the day with COVID-19 possible symptoms, including fever, it will be treated as if it is COVID-19 until it can be determined otherwise. We will have an isolation room for such individuals until they can be picked up. Another question has been what will happen if a student or

staff member travels to an area/state that is currently on New Jersey's quarantine list. The answer to this question is that said student or staff member WILL NOT be admitted to school until the recommended 14-day self-quarantine period is over. Of course, in order to be fully implemented this process relies on the honesty of those who have traveled. I sincerely hope that no person would intentionally conceal travel to an affected area/state; however, the State of New Jersey has not currently authorized any enforcement method for this process. As a result, neither can I. Finally, what happens if a child has a fever for a reason unrelated to COVID-19? At this time, I envision denying the child entry to the building until either the fever is no longer present for 48 hours, or the parent can provide a diagnosis from a doctor indicating that the fever has a cause other than COVID-19. This is fluid, however, and the policy may change as the health department issues future guidance and directives.

- 11- **Masks and shields** – The plan continues to be that all adults, as well as all students Grades 5-8, will be required to wear masks all day except for designated times (eating, recess, PE class, etc.) Students in Grade 4 and below will be required to wear masks at all times in "common" areas, including hallways, stairwells, restrooms, arrival, and dismissal. They will also be required to wear masks when moving about their classrooms. These students will be allowed to remove their masks ONLY when sitting at their desks and ONLY IF their parents have purchased the desk shield. Even in this case, if a child demonstrates that they are unable to use the shield properly the school will reserve the right to require mask usage. This will be detailed in the shield order form/agreement. Students in Grades 5-8 may also purchase shields for added protection, but this will not release them from wearing masks.

Items from Updates 1 and 2

1. No changes.
2. Supply orders are moving along. Inexpensive plastic lap desks are being added to the supplies for all grades to allow outdoor classes/lunches.
3. No changes, however, it will be beneficial for all families to have a working printer at home. Now is the time to take advantage of any summer sales.
4. No changes.
5. Freckle credentials should be to you by now via US Mail. If not, please email Mrs. Adams.
6. The shield order form will be sent early next week.