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Dear SUSD Families,

With your attention in the coming days turning to spending time with loved ones during the holidays, I know you are anxious to learn what the plans are for our second semester return to learning, before we part ways for two-plus weeks.

Our experience this past semester affirms the importance of providing in-person education for students at all levels. As we continue to navigate the challenges associated with COVID-19, we are entering a new phase, both in terms of community spread and our plans for the second semester. Tomorrow, when the county's latest COVID data is posted, all three benchmark metrics – the number of cases per 100,000 people, the percentage of positive tests and the percentage of COVID-like cases being seen at local hospitals – will, for the first time since this summer, be red for Scottsdale Unified School District's zip codes, indicating that there is substantial spread of the coronavirus in our community. The timing is fortuitous since it comes at the end of the first semester and we prepare for a two-week winter break.

Past guidance from the Maricopa County Department of Public Health (MCDPH) and the Arizona Department of Health Services pointed to a return to virtual learning with onsite support when all three benchmarks were red. However, as more research emerges with respect to COVID-19 transmission and schools, better and more effective treatments are identified, and with the arrival of an FDA-approved vaccine, the public health agencies to which we look for guidance have updated their recommendations this week. They now embrace the kind of building-by-building approach SUSD has been using in recent months, in consultation with MCDPH, to help determine whether schools should remain open for in-person learning.*

That said, we also recognize that the upcoming holidays offer new opportunities for COVID spread in our community and in our family circles, and have taken that into account in planning our January return. The Governing Board decided last night to implement the following phased-in return to in-person learning to start the second semester:

- Monday, January 4, 2021: Pre-K, Elementary and Special Education self-contained students will return for full-day, in-person learning, using the current schedule
- Monday, January 11, 2021: Middle school students will return for in-person learning, using the current schedule; *learning will be virtual the week of January 4*
- Tuesday, January 19, 2021: High school students will return for in-person learning, using the current schedule; *learning will be virtual the weeks of January 4 and January 11* (Monday, January 18, is Martin Luther King, Jr. Day)

Each K-8 school is being provided with some flexibility to determine whether January 4 or 11 is the appropriate return date for their grade 6-8 students. Principals will inform their families directly of their decision. We will also share more information with you in our weekly parent letter on Friday about what each level's learning model will initially look like for the coming semester. In the meantime, please direct any questions you may have to our [Let's Talk](#) platform.

We believe this measured approach to beginning 2021 is what is best for students and staff at this time. We will continue to monitor the metrics with MCDPH during Winter Break, in the event new data suggests a revised re-opening plan. I sincerely hope that it does not. We are grateful for the support and partnership with our staff, parents and community as we work to ensure our schools remain a safe place to learn. The decisions we have had to make during this year have not been easy, but the focus has been and will continue to be meeting the needs of our students in the best way possible. Scottsdale Unified School District has continued to invest in options for parents, so that students who need to have an online learning experience also have their needs met.

As always, thank you for your continued great input and passion for your students' best interests. We have them at the very heart of everything we do, as well.

Sincerely,

Scott A. Menzel, PhD
Superintendent

*** Statement Regarding MCDPH Support for In-person learning at Schools**

In October 2020, the Arizona Department of Health Services published recommendations for schools "Safely Returning to In-person Instruction¹" to guide schools in monitoring community level spread and maintaining a safe learning environment. Based on this guidance, ADHS states "If a county has all three benchmarks in the red category, ADHS recommends schools transition to virtual learning in consultation with their local health department." This statement is a general recommendation. In discussions with ADHS, MCDPH and ADHS have agreed to support those jurisdictions who are able to maintain a safe learning environment with regular school-by-school monitoring, regardless of levels of community COVID-19 transmission. If a school/district does not have enough staffing to maintain a safe environment, or if a school/district experiences a school-related outbreak that cannot be controlled with public health mitigation strategies, MCDPH would support transitioning to a virtual learning environment.

Further, with the recent publications emphasizing the benefits of in-person learning, particularly for elementary schools², and the emerging data indicating that in-person school attendance is not a risk factor for youth testing positive for COVID 19³, MCDPH recommends preferentially keeping elementary and middle schools open for in-person learning. If a phased approach is desired, MCDPH recommends beginning with elementary and middle schools prior to opening high schools to in-person learning.

¹ <https://www.azdhs.gov/documents/preparedness/epidemiology-disease-control/infectious-disease-epidemiology/novel-coronavirus/covid-19-safely-return-to-in-person-instruction.pdf>

² <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2772834>

³ https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6950e3.htm?s_cid=mm6950e3_w



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