

## *Board of Education Update - February 10, 2022*

### **Return to School Plan & COVID-19 Mitigations: Proposed Shift**

I want to begin by recognizing the abrupt change in direction the district has taken following the results of the TRO. I understand that this has caused some frustration and uncertainty for many families. I also want to commend the vast majority of our parents, staff, and students for how well they have handled this change and continue to conduct themselves in the Raider Way. Prior to this weekend's ruling, I had originally intended to deliver a message casting my vision forward for what the next several months are hopefully going to look like. As we are seeing the landscape around the country evolve and change along with the virus, I believe it is time we start thinking about life beyond required masking in schools. A number of states who have a universal masking policy have set sunset dates for those to expire and although Governor Pritzker's message earlier this week did not include schools, it is a step in that direction. In an ideal situation, we could have cast this picture of our future and started to prepare for this change in order to ease anxiety for our students and families and provide our rationale at this stage of the pandemic. We were preparing to deliver this message and engage in discussion with the Board ahead of the TRO decision.

We know COVID-19 is still very contagious and can be a deadly virus. Its continued presence in our lives is not in question. However, I am encouraged to report that vaccination rates in our area are strong and continue to increase. Vaccines are available to all school age children and widely available to adults. This is an important factor in our decision-making and is part of my proposal for our shift in responding to the virus. While COVID-19 has mutated a few times, the most recent variant, although extremely contagious, has shown lesser impact in longevity and overall illness to the youngest people and those without comorbidity, especially if they have been vaccinated.

As I think about life in an *endemic*, which I believe we are on the verge of being in, it is one that includes the choice to wear a mask in all aspects of life. On a larger scale, I believe that everyone needs to make some concessions in order for us to move forward.

- We need to acknowledge that the vaccine is safe and has been proven to be effective scientifically. Whether or not you elect to take the vaccine remains personal, however, we need to acknowledge its role in keeping our community safe.
- We also need to acknowledge the declining risk that COVID-19 poses during the functions of everyday life. The majority of scientists and local health officials agree that we are not where we were 18 months ago. The nature of the virus has changed to a point where its reduced severity and continued presence will need to be something we can live with. Our practices and decision making processes should now reflect our ability as a society to move forward with both realistic mitigations and a return to essential social behaviors.

- We also need to recognize and begin to accept that some risk exists in life. Meaning that, as this virus becomes more and more like other viruses we live with, our behaviors must begin to accept that risk and move forward while engaging all of the knowledge at our disposal.
  - It is also important to consider that high quality masks do exist, as outlined by the CDC, that offer high levels of personal protection. As we move forward, the choice to mask in daily life may be a lasting part of our future, and for those who elect to utilize them, they should be free to do so without ridicule.
- I think the best thing we all can agree on is the need to accept that everyone has a different view on this situation and how we should progress forward. I only hope that we can seek some common ground and agree that it is time for us to cast our eyes ahead. I believe it may be time to look beyond the crisis portion of this historical event—it is not time to forget, but to take all of the tools, knowledge and endurance we have gained over the past 2 years and find a way to work together for the continued improvement of our education system in Huntley 158 and our community in which we live.

### **Huntley 158's Involvement in TRO Appeal**

Some questions have been raised regarding the fact that our school district is listed among those districts appealing the TRO decision when we shifted to a mask recommended environment. As a named defendant in the case, we were faced with the decision whether or not to be added to the appeal before we knew the outcome so the attorneys could prepare and file the necessary documents immediately following the decision in case it went against the state. Additionally, the attorneys explained that regardless of whether or not we were on the appeal, we would be subject to the decision if an appeal were necessary. Furthermore, the appeal the state is seeking remains different from the appeal our attorneys are seeking, which is the ability to maintain local control over safety decisions.

The ability to maintain local control when the safety of our students and staff is in question means that we have the independence to make decisions even beyond masking in schools. This appeal would grant Huntley 158 the control to make decisions about our mitigation efforts and overall safety measures, and to act on them through consideration of public health recommendations rather than the decisions of the state.