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Michelle Dutrow, Superintendent

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Good Afternoon:

My communication today serves as an update regarding implementation of the new Masking Order and subsequent events around that change. First and foremost, the District expresses its appreciation to all our families who have handled this disappointing and frustrating change with grace. The students and staff are settling back into masking and are ready to move on with the school year understanding there will be more change to come.

Masking Implementation

As previously shared, all students and employees must be masked while in school and participating in other school activities except for outdoor instruction, recess, engaged in play for athletics, and while eating. Masking breaks of 15-minutes each will be provided for all students and employees throughout the school day. Ignoring non-compliance by students results in non-compliance by the District. The District has accepted unmasked students the past two days as we have worked through options with parents. At this time, any student arriving and refusing to mask will be sent home. The District has provided educational program options and one of those options must be selected at this time.

We have received questions regarding a masking exemption. Upon receipt of a medical authorization, the district will process your request. As per PDE guidance, we are following our formal process used to provide accommodations for students with protected needs. This should not be confused with a disability as it is a different process. Requests made for reasons other than medical need will be reviewed accordingly.

Student Interactions

I am asking for parental assistance with a growing issue and that is student disagreements on the issue of masking. Like adults, students have the right to form their own opinions and to exercise their right of free speech. However, with that being said, that freedom cannot be used to disrupt the instructional day or more importantly to bully or harass other students/adults. I respectfully request that all parents have this conversation with their child/children and remind them that with these freedoms come responsibilities, and all students are subject to consequences for any violation of the school code of conduct, district policy or state/federal laws. I would hope we could use this experience as an educational moment and help to grow respectful, articulate, and well-informed young people.

District Social Media

By now, many of you may be aware or have realized that West Branch no longer has an active page. The decision was made last night to de-activate the page at this time. While I was the one who supported and recommended the comment feature, the deterioration in conduct over the past 24 hours on our site as well as several other sites was just no longer acceptable. When blatant lies about feeding and caring for children and the misuse of unauthorized student photos takes center stage, then West Branch is out! The safety of our students and employees will not be jeopardized for the sake of parent engagement. After a cooling off period, we will consider restoring the page. Communications will be sent via email or may be accessed on the District website.

False Narratives

Ove the past several days, there have been several instances of misinformation that have spiraled, damaging not only the school district but the community as a whole. I would feel remiss if I didn't take a moment to address a few which have fed a false narrative. First, no unmasked student was denied breakfast or lunch. Administration had a very detailed plan for the opening of school on Tuesday which included rearranging breakfast for this group. Further, the District received no specific threat of violence on the school property. The shifting of recess and athletic practices to indoors yesterday was a precautionary measure to avoid possible negative interactions either directly involving, or in the presence of, our students. Moreover, 15-minute masks breaks are being provided generously throughout the school day with approximately 8 per building (classroom and lunch). That equates to approximately 2 hours per 6.5-hour day. I'm sure there may be more, but these seemed to have consumed our social media presence.

Fall Athletics

Tomorrow we host our first volleyball game for the 2021 Fall Season. This is a reminder that, as an indoor event, all spectators must be masked. All outdoor athletic events remain unmasked currently. We respectfully request your cooperation with this requirement.

COVID Cases

At this time, the District has several positive/presumed positive cases. Specifically, we have two (2) students (Kindergarten and Grade 10). Contact tracing has been completed for both positive cases with no quarantines needed. We also have three (3) students/staff awaiting test results (Office, Grade 11, and Grade 12).

Micki Dutrow