



July 8, 2020

Dear Portland Public Schools families,

This letter is part of our ongoing communications that I'll be sending you this summer to keep you current on our plans for the new 2020-2021 school year. In this letter, I'll explain in more detail the intensive work we're doing right now to be prepared for a variety of school options this fall. I'll also talk about how parent voices are informing our planning.

As I outlined in my [June 18 letter](#), our Reopening Planning Team is working on three possible scenarios for the new school year: a full reopening of school; a hybrid scenario that includes both in-person school and remote learning; and full remote learning. These scenarios are consistent with what districts across the country are considering at this time. A decision on which scenario we'll enact won't take place until early to mid August, when we'll know more about COVID-19 public health restrictions and Maine Department of Education (MDOE) guidance.

The health and safety of our students, staff and community will be our top priority for each of the three scenarios, especially those involving a full or partial return to in-person school. We're taking such steps as ordering personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks; establishing enhanced hygiene and cleaning protocols; and making facilities modifications that include ensuring classrooms have good ventilation and that rooms are configured so that students and staff are able to safely maintain physical distancing.

I want to take this opportunity to clarify how the potential hybrid scenario would work. The hybrid scenario would be necessary if physical distancing guidelines in place this fall would limit us to delivering in-person instruction to only a portion of our student population on a given day. Students would attend school in smaller groups headed by consistent staff members for up to two days per week, either on Monday and Tuesday (Group A) or Thursday and Friday (Group B). For the days students aren't in school, they would learn remotely.

In a more limited hybrid scenario, in-person school would be provided for ALL specific student populations that would most benefit from in-person learning: pre-kindergarten through grade 2; sixth-graders and ninth-graders; and students with special learning needs. What wasn't clear in our previous communications is that in-person school also would be available when school starts this fall to students in all other grades – 3-5, 7-8, and 10-12 – on the same type of two-day rotating schedule outlined above. However, because physical distancing guidelines would prevent us from having all our students in school at once, in-person school would be available to only SOME students in those grades. Approximately one-third of them would be in the Monday and Tuesday "A" Group, one-third in the Thursday and Friday "B" Group, and one-third would continue to remain in full remote-learning mode. The A and B groups would learn remotely when not in school. We also are developing plans for a hybrid model that would allow ALL students to access in-person school two days per week if state and local health guidance allows us to serve up to half our students on a given day.

As you can see, planning for each scenario is challenging and complex. We're considering each option from many angles to make sure we can deliver optimal learning while keeping students and staff safe. We have nearly 15 [Reopening Work Groups](#) made up of teachers, administrators and other staff, informed by the parent feedback we received from our survey and focus groups.

The Work Groups all have a specific focus. The dedicated focus of each group allows us to plan more specifically for the unique challenges each scenario can pose for students in different grades levels and with different needs.

Some Work Groups are organized around grade levels. Other Work Groups are focusing on high-needs students, including students with special learning needs. We also have Work Groups focusing on physical health, social-emotional health, family engagement and outdoor learning. Other Work Groups are focusing on such services as technology, transportation and school lunch and breakfast. Each scenario will make very different demands on these services and we need to have plans in place for whichever one becomes our reality. Work Groups are scheduled to report out in late July and we will then organize another round of parent and student feedback ahead of a report to the Portland Board of Public Education on Aug. 4.

As noted, our Work Groups are using the feedback we received from parents. The family survey conducted in June made it clear that we need to make significant improvements in remote learning in the future, including more direct instruction from classroom teachers. That survey showed most parents districtwide – 63 percent of respondents – support sending their children back to school this fall. Here's a [summary of results](#) from the survey at the elementary, middle and high school levels.

Several themes also emerged from our [parent focus groups](#), who were asked about their families' experience with remote learning. We held four separate focus groups with parent representatives from the Board of Public Education's Family Partnership Advisory Committee, Equity For Portland Schools, the Portland Public Schools PTO Coalition, and a representative cross section of our multilingual families.

Those parents let us know what we can do to improve remote learning. Parents said they want more instruction, communication, and feedback from teachers for both themselves and their children. They asked for consistency and clarity in learning expectations and student feedback, and for consistent remote learning schedules that can accommodate working parents and family child care needs.

Parents also want training so they can work collaboratively with teachers to help their children. Families of children with special needs said remote learning was particularly challenging for those students. Those families and also families who have limited or no English asked for more help and support to assist their children.

As we at the Portland Public Schools work to develop scenarios for the fall, MDOE also is working to guide a safe return to classroom instruction in the new school year. To that end, MDOE is seeking feedback from families, educators, administrators and school support staff. Each of those four groups is invited to fill out a survey specific to them, which is available July 6 through July 12. I encourage all PPS families to take this additional opportunity to make your voices heard. Please fill out the [Family Survey](#), which is available in 11 different languages.

I know that everyone is longing for a return to normal. As we approach the school year, we will have a clearer picture of the circumstances that are in play and will dictate our course of action. Regardless of the scenario we decide to follow, our overall goal is a stronger learning experience for all our students. I will keep you current on the latest developments as we continue our planning for school this fall.

Sincerely,



Xavier Botana, Superintendent