

November 25, 2020

Dear Cashmere Families,

During these extremely challenging times, I want to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to our families and community for all the support, grace and patience you have provided as we navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. Since schools were closed to in-person instruction last March, we have been committed to maintaining viable academic programs that meet the varying needs of our students and support our families' altered schedules. The purpose of this communication is to notify you that on Monday, November 23rd, the Cashmere School Board voted unanimously to expand the in-person learning option, currently provided to our K-6 families, to secondary students (7th through 12th grade). This in-person learning option will begin on November 30th, following the same hybrid half-day schedule as our elementary students. The School Board reached this conclusion due to three main reasons: the school districts' COVID-19 mitigation strategies, alarming academic data and student mental health concerns.

While we recognize COVID-19 case counts continue to rise throughout our region, state and country, studies show very low rates of transmission in schools that follow recommended health protocols for mitigating the spread of COVID-19 for in-person learning. As of November 23rd, with roughly 1,000 students and staff on-site each day, we have recorded 12 positive cases in our schools. Through contact tracing in conjunction with the Chelan Douglas Health District, we have determined that these cases originated from community spread outside of school. Currently, there is no evidence of transmission in our schools. While community spread is occurring in the area, our mitigation strategies are working within the school buildings.

Beyond our demonstrated ability to keep students and staff safe in school, we are examining multiple other data points as we move to expand in-person learning options to 7-12th grade. What we have found has strengthened our resolve to provide an in-person learning option to the remainder of our students. While we are extremely thankful for staff and their incredible commitment and dedication to learn and implement online/remote instruction, many of our kids continue to struggle despite our very best efforts. Approximately, half of our high school students currently have a D, F, or combination of both, and a growing number of our seniors are not on track to graduate in June. While online attendance is still high, academic production and true engagement is waning. As we examine the data further, it has become apparent that our most vulnerable students are struggling the most and the equity gap is increasing. This reiterates the need for in-person connection and instruction to help fill these gaps and bring all of our students onto a more level playing field.

We also know how important safe, in-person education is to our students' social and emotional well-being. We believe the cornerstone to strong academics is strong relationships. Social and Emotional research is clear regarding the critical importance for each student to have at least one adult in school that they can connect with. Recently, the high school conducted a connection survey that identified an alarming number of our students who are no longer "connected" to anyone at the school. What's more, according to the Chelan County Sheriff's Department, the number of wellness calls and home visits are increasing dramatically in our community. Our students' mental health is being negatively impacted without an in-person option. We have seen the joy and excitement the in-person option has brought our K – 6th students, and we believe it would be remiss not to offer an in-person option to our 7-12th students to provide the social and emotional support that is as important, if not more, than the academics they receive.

For all the reasons previously stated, we believe it is our duty to provide an in-person option. However, we absolutely honor and respect our families that choose to stay remote. All remote learning options will continue to be available for any families that wish not to choose our in-person learning option. Further, we will continue to monitor multiple data points to ensure staff and student safety. If we detect any in-school transmissions, outbreaks, or a lack of available staff due to quarantining, our system will allow us to pivot at any time to fully remote learning. Finally, in an effort to maintain transparency and provide families with as much information as possible so they may choose the best learning option for their students, we now have a data dashboard on our website, which is updated daily so that families can monitor cases within our schools (See link below).

<https://www.cashmere.wednet.edu/domain/722>

In closing, I want to once again thank you for your flexibility and support as we work together to provide the safest and highest quality educational experience for our students. In this season of giving thanks, I am so grateful for the opportunity to serve this community. I have seen our collective strength in times of challenge, and I know we will rise to do our part to ensure our schools can maintain a safe in-person learning option.

Happy Thanksgiving! Please enjoy the break and stay safe and healthy.

Sincerely,

Glenn Johnson
Superintendent
Cashmere School District