



Increasing Daily Student Attendance Update

February 26, 2021

Dear Irvington School Community,

I am pleased to report that today, as a result of the headway being made in the fight against COVID-19 and the introduction of highly effective vaccines, the Irvington UFSD is firmly on the path to attaining our shared goal: for our students to be in school as they should be, five days a week. There are layers of intricacy to school operations as we increase in-person attendance while, at the same time, ensure a healthy school environment. As we reach our shared goal, your patience will be critical as will your ongoing trust in our educators.

It is important to provide all stakeholders with a foundation of factual information to understand the priorities and details associated with this important initiative. Therefore, this communication is intended to provide essential information. While this is a lengthy letter, please take the time to review it.

Initiative Timeline

At the February 23, 2021 Board of Education meeting, I presented an overview of the District's planning process towards attaining *our goal*. Please take a moment to [review the presentation materials](#) and [listen to community discussion](#). As I made clear that evening, we have two major progress points to reach in the upcoming weeks:

Recommendation for implementation plan: on or before March 23, 2021

Implementation of plan: on or before April 30, 2021.

Three Tenets to Advance the Initiative

I have established three tenets to serve as the foundation of the initiative to increase daily student attendance. Each of these are essential principles intended to provide for the health and safety of students and staff:

1. All staff must have access to receiving the COVID-19 vaccine;
2. The District must have unfettered access to NYS-sponsored surveillance testing;
and
3. NYSDOH guidelines clarification.

Vaccinations

Having teachers, who are interested, and able to, receive the COVID-19 vaccination will play a key role in protecting the health of staff, ensuring they are able to be in attendance to lead instruction and limiting the spread of the virus in our schools. It has been very difficult for one to obtain an appointment in a reasonable timeframe using the NYSDOH scheduling application. Following this process alone, for staff to be vaccinated would have extended near the end of the school year. Therefore, the IUFSD took the initiative in partnership with the WCDOH to coordinate a special vaccination clinic for Irvington staff; the opportunity was extended to over 120 staff members. As a result, the majority of staff will have presumed immunity (both vaccine doses) by the end of March.

Surveillance Testing

Surveillance testing, while not required, will play a valuable role in maintaining the health of our students and staff. The District has obtained a license to administer

COVID-19 testing and has acquired BinaxNOW rapid antigen test kits. Testing protocols will be developed in partnership with District Medical Director, Dr. Katherine Hough and the WCDOH. Additionally, metrics will be outlined to serve as guidelines for maintaining increased levels of student attendance.

Department of Health Guidance on Social Distancing

The District must comply with all NYSDOH guidelines. While the CDC provides additional recommendations, schools must follow those standards set forth by New York's governing agencies. When considering these requirements, it is permissible for schools to expand daily student attendance without maintaining six feet of social distancing with the use of barriers. For more information on applicable guidelines, please [review the presentation](#) that was delivered at the February 23, 2021 Board of Education meeting.

Mitigation Strategies

The District has successfully implemented layered strategies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in our schools: mask-wearing; physical distancing; handwashing & respiratory etiquette; deep-cleaning of facilities; and contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine in collaboration with our health department. Together these measures have resulted in no in-school transmission thus far in the school year, as these strategies have had a significant impact on maintaining low positivity rates. The increase in vaccinated individuals, the use of barriers, and the implementation of school-based surveillance testing are additional layers of the mitigation strategy that will play a key role in ensuring the District's success as it increases in-person attendance for students. Nonetheless, increased viral spread in schools and/or more frequent quarantining due to changed minimums for physical distancing are both possibilities for which we must prepare in all schools that increase daily student attendance.

Continuation of a 100% Distance Learning Option

Approximately 14% of the Irvington student population attend school remotely. While we are committed to bringing students into the school buildings, the District will continue to offer a 100% distance learning option in its forthcoming recommendations. However, if the majority of students return to in-person learning, families who select remote only learning will experience a more passive delivery of instruction than that which exists in the current hybrid model.

Current Success in Increasing Daily Attendance

Over the past months, the District has made strides to increase daily attendance by seeking to support the youngest learners and those with learning needs. This is evidenced through the shift from the initial hybrid schedule to enable kindergarten and first grade students to attend school four days per week, while still maintaining the cohort through AM/PM attendance. In addition, students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP) in co-taught classes began attending four days weekly on February 8, 2021.

Flex Wednesday Supported Success

Facilitating a high-quality education through the pandemic has required a significant change to instructional practices. The magnitude in this shift in teaching and learning cannot be understated because nearly every aspect of the school experience has been altered and has called upon our team of skilled educators to adapt or reinvent all that they do. As the District progresses in its plans to increase in-person student attendance, it is important to understand the role that Flex Wednesdays have played in supporting the current success and laid the groundwork for future attendance opportunities. Flex Wednesdays provided afternoon hours necessary during which our faculty and staff planned and collaborated and participated in significant professional learning that: enriched instruction, provided models for teaching in the hybrid structure, and introduced skills to effectively utilize technology and technological applications. Without this dedicated time, student experiences would have inevitably suffered as teachers would have been removed from classes for necessary professional work and, moreover, the District would not be as prepared as it is today for the evolution of daily in-person student attendance.

We Must Focus on Irvington

It is easy to draw comparisons between school districts, states or countries, but I caution against this. We can learn from the experiences of others; however, the experiences of

others are specific to their logistics, facts, enrollment, facilities, finances, etc. Some districts had empty classrooms due to declines in enrollment where they could split classes to increase the number of days in school or, in some cases, hired dozens of teachers to reduce class sizes to comply with distancing guidelines because of their budget size. These examples do not align with the Irvington facts.

We can take time and effort to compare the haves and have nots or even spend time promoting those aspects of the IUFSD hybrid experience that exceed that of other locations, but that will only detract from what the focus is now. Our reality is that we have done a commendable job in serving our students during a pandemic that has overwhelmed the world, and NOW our focus is on the future. This is an incredible community that has aligned itself with our mission to serve all of our students' needs. Let's rally together for our children and to achieve our goal to increase daily student attendance.

In the weeks before us, I will need your support. The first such request is in the completion of a survey. You will receive this survey in a separate email. Please complete it by no later than Tuesday, March 2nd at 4:00 pm, as it will inform our planning. Every family is asked to participate as soon as you receive it.

My personal thanks for your continued support and trust. Together, we can achieve our goals.

Every student, every day,

Dr. Kris Harrison
Superintendent of Schools

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