

March 12, 2021

Dear RSU 16 Families, Staff, and Community Members,

In July 2020, Maine developed and implemented a Framework for Return to In-Person Instruction. This framework – developed in consultation with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Maine CDC – included recommendations for schools and **six requirements**, including physical distancing, mask wearing and other measures, to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission within schools. These six requirements we attest to in order to receive federal relief funds, and they have guided our work this year to ensure the health and safety of our staff and students. The new case rates for Maine schools has been and continues to be significantly lower than that of the general population.

In February 2021, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S. CDC) released Federal recommendations to assist schools in safely returning to in-person instruction. These recommendations were issued to assist districts across the country that have not progressed as far as Maine in reopening schools for in-person instruction. The Federal guidance mostly emulated Maine's Framework, recommending the use of physical distancing, of mask wearing, and of a tiered, color-coded advisory system to support schools. The Federal guidance is more stringent than Maine's in some instances, for example recommending a minimum of six feet between students, masked, at all times, while Maine has adopted the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation of three feet for children which has, with other protocols, been successful.

The U.S. CDC continues to strongly recommend – even as school staff get vaccinated – the use of practices like those established through their recommendations and under Maine's Framework to keep students and school staff safe. Currently, Maine is maintaining the requirements within its framework, which means RSU 16 will follow the requirements of Maine's framework. If the U.S. CDC recommends lifting public health protocols such as minimum space between students, Maine will review and consider adjustments to its Framework.

What this likely means is that the safety protocols and instructional model RSU 16 has in place are likely to remain in place through the end of the school year. Why? Our biggest barrier to five day a week face-to-face instruction is physical distancing. It is the same requirement that required us to open up in the hybrid model this past fall even though we were green. Another way to think about this is...with more students on site, you need more square footage in buildings and unfortunately this is something we are short on here in RSU 16. Here's an example: A classroom at Poland Community School (PCS) that normally holds 22 - 23 students may only be able to hold 17 with 3 feet of physical distance...what do we do with the other 6 students that won't fit if we return to full face-to-face instruction? Then add having to have 6 feet of separation for students to eat because they have to remove masks. You might say have teachers change rooms, but there are 14 classrooms at PCS that would be over the physical distancing 3 feet requirement. And this is just one school.

What are we, as the RSU 16 leaders, doing? We continue to advocate for a review of the physical distancing requirement with our respective superintendent and curriculum leaders groups, especially when the Commissioner of Education or Deputy Commissioner of Education collaborate with our groups. In addition, Amy shares her opinion with Governor Mills weekly through this [link](#) and Ken has written a formal letter to Governor Mills. We are asking Governor Mills to remove the 3 or 6 feet physical distance requirement between students with the use of another mitigating factor such as plexiglass between students in the classroom so we can return to five day a week instruction (if not this year, then certainly next year).

In closing, thank you to our staff, families and community who continue to work tirelessly together for our children.

Sincerely,

Ken Healey and Amy Hediger