

Dear Belmont Schools Community,

I recently reported to the School Committee on the progress of our Return to In-Person Learning Working Group and the steps we are taking to offer all students a full-time, in-person school option prior to the end of this school year. For those who were not able to attend the meeting, I would like to share my [presentation](#) and provide an update. We are making good strides at each school level and are confident that we will end the school year in a positive place.

Elementary Schools

Beginning on April 5 the 90% of our elementary students who have chosen the in-person option will be back in school 5 days/week in a full-day schedule. Our remote students will be in their own dedicated remote classrooms with the same schedule. We have staffed this plan almost entirely with teachers who were already in the district (and the addition of one new-to-Belmont teacher) and are very happy to provide this continuity to students.

Elementary communities had meetings this week to discuss this new phase of learning and to hear from the staff of McLean Hospital on the topic of stewarding children through transitions. Students moving from remote to in-person learning had an opportunity to come to school as a preview to what they will experience when they come back to their school building. Teachers continue to meet to coordinate with each other and do a thoughtful transfer of students from one classroom to another. Our operations team is working diligently to set up new tents, desks, and chairs, and to work through the details of arrival, dismissal, snack breaks, and lunch.

Three of our elementary schools are home to voting locations and will be in use for this purpose during Belmont's elections on April 6th. At this point the weather looks good and we will use our outside spaces as much as possible during the day. Thanks to the Town Clerk's office, the Police Department, and our Facilities Department for their support on election day. We encourage and appreciate our school families and the greater Belmont community to extend extra patience to one another on this complicated but essential day.

Chenery Middle School

Chenery is also moving forward with a full return to in-person learning for the 86% of students who have chosen it. We will institute this new plan on April 28th, and possibly earlier for 5th grade (we will provide a firm date for 5th grade by April 9th). We are still working through several open questions, such as the best way to use our limited number of large spaces for lunch, gym, and music. Representatives from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) visited Chenery earlier this week to better understand our constraints and help us brainstorm solutions, and we will solidify the plan in the coming weeks. Our remote students in grades 6-8 will participate via a live-streaming model. Our 5th grade students will be in a remote academy. We are currently working through the best way to staff each class and are very hopeful that we will be able to do this without the need to hire new staff members.

Belmont High School

BHS students will soon be moving into a revised hybrid plan and then into a full in-person and remote learning model. On April 12th hybrid students will start attending in-person school four mornings per week (hybrid cohorts A and B will be in school at the same time). Schedules will remain the same and remote students will continue to participate via live-streaming. Students have been surveyed to determine which mode of learning they will participate in and we will now work to confirm capacity and properly outfit space for each class of students in the school. This will be a bridge to our full in-person plan and will allow us to test the operational pieces of our model before we move to a full in-person return.

At this point high schools in Massachusetts have not received any formal guidance from DESE about the elements that will be required for a full, in-person return to school. Despite this, we are moving ahead using our best assumptions in an effort to move full in-person learning forward for high school students while remaining compliant with the state's potential future requirements. High school students are not grouped in the same way as elementary or even middle school students and we are working on plans to minimize the number of close contacts that may occur. We are also considering various options for lunch. Finally, we are working through options for AP tests and state-mandated MCAS testing, both of which require space beyond our typical daily needs.

All of our schools are using CDC-recommended health and safety measures in order to mitigate the spread of Covid-19. These measures include always having at least 3 feet of distance between students (and more during unmasked and other special situations), using a health tracker daily, wearing masks, sanitizing surfaces, and washing hands. We are also using pooled testing at the high school and are providing symptomatic testing for staff at all schools. We will continue to prioritize health and safety as we bring greater numbers of students back to our buildings. We are grateful to the parents who have volunteered to be bus and lunch monitors in order to help us maintain high safety standards in all schools.

I very much share many parents' desire to bring students back to school in a way that is physically and emotionally healthy for them. I am simultaneously dedicated to ensuring that our remote students have an experience that is equally as academically and socially enriching as the in-person experience. Most important is that we will end the school year in a way that allows students to be emotionally prepared for a significantly more normal return to school in September. I am grateful to the members of the Return to In-Person Learning Working Group and to all of the families who have worked alongside us as we make plans for our full return to in-person learning.

Please feel free to reach out to me with your thoughts and questions.

Respectfully,

John P. Phelan
Superintendent of Schools