

GRAND ISLE SUPERVISORY UNION

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30 September 2020

Dear Parents, Guardians & Community members,

Last week, in addition to sharing how proud I am of the way the faculty, staff, and students are adapting to the new routines, practices, and procedures related to reopening with Covid-19 in the community letter, I also shared that Secretary French announced that schools would move from level two to level three. Last week's community letter is available [here](#) or, if you prefer to watch a recording of the weekly community meeting, it is available [here](#). On September 24th, the Vermont Agency of Education released this [FAQ](#) about what the move from level two to level three means for schools. As you can see the level two to level three really just impacts some aspects of transportation, use of spaces like the gymnasium or cafeteria, grouping/pod configurations, and interscholastic athletics. Schools are still expected to follow the [Strong and Healthy Start Guidance](#) published by the Vermont Agency of Education this summer.

GISU's number one goal related to reopening was and will continue to be to reopen safely for students, faculty, staff, and the community. It has been three weeks since we and many other Vermont schools have returned to more in-person learning and teaching. Based on data collected by the [Vermont Department of Health on School Based Transmission of Covid-19](#) as of Monday, September 28th there have been four documented cases of Covid-19 in Vermont School (none in any of the GISU schools) and there have been no documented cases of transmission of Covid-19 in schools. This is an early indication that the steps we and other schools throughout the state have taken are working to keep everyone safe.

We have also begun to look at local assessments and the early data indicates that students are returning to school this fall with larger gaps than in previous years. While we all suspected this would likely be the case it is still sombering to see these predictions coming true. I am proud of the work our faculty, staff, students, and families have done to make remote learning work and at the same time we know that in person learning is better for a majority of students.

Knowing that we have already seen some success returning to limited in person learning using our new routines, procedures, and practices coupled with importance of increasing more in person learning opportunities for K-5 students, it is time for the GISU to explore how to safely increase in person learning opportunities for the families who want and are comfortable that option, while continuing to provide remote only learning opportunities for the families who want and are comfortable with that option. Doing this safely and with a high degree of quality is complex and requires extensive thought and planning. It is critical that we take the time and get this right. It is also important to know that all of our schools operate in slightly (and in some cases significantly) different ways. Those differences may impact our ability and/or timeline to return some classes/grades to more in person learning.

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Where we are in the Process:

We have started to develop a plan to return more students to in person learning. On Monday, during the inservice, I met with teachers and administrators and we talked about some of the challenges that are inherent in returning more students to more in person learning and I'll share some of those considerations with you later in this letter. What was clear to me in this conversation was some of the students who struggled the most with remote learning are our K-2 students. It was also clear that we believe we should be able to safely return our K-2 students to more in person learning while continuing to follow the VT AOE Strong and Healthy Start as well as the GISU Reopening Plan guidelines. This is only possible because the VT AOE Strong and Healthy Start guidelines have been adjusted to allow for students in K-5 practice social distancing of a little as three feet.

There is some question as to how quickly this can be done. I believe it makes sense to bring back K at each of the schools first to be sure our new routines, procedures, and practices continue to be able to be implemented with increased class sizes. Bringing K back results in approximately a 10% increase in the student population at each school. After a week of having more in person learning for K students, and learning about potential challenges, we could then bring back grades 1 and 2. When we have K-2 back in the schools for more in person learning our school population is approximately 20-25% greater than our current hybrid model. I believe we should be able to target the return to more in person learning by the end of October or beginning of November.

Will there still be a remote option?

We will continue to need to meet the needs of our students who are participating in school through remote only learning opportunities. Therefore it will be important to maintain the two structures we have intentionally put in place for that support: the adjusted school day and remote learning for all on Wednesdays. It is critical to understand that our current instructional model requires that our dedicated teachers work with both in person and remote only learners and to successfully do that they need time with our remote learners.

Will all grade levels come back to fully in person?

Grades 3, 4, and 5 become more complicated. Even applying the adjusted social distancing guidelines of three feet it is likely that some of our classrooms may not be able to return to more in person learning and meet this requirement in all of our schools. Additionally our grades are configured in different ways in different buildings which has the potential to impact the fifth grade. While we are carefully exploring our options for grades 3, 4, and 5 the complexity is going to take more time to resolve.

Grades 6, 7, and 8 do not have adjusted social distancing guidelines at this time. As a result the 6 foot social distancing requirement remains and with that requirement in place it is unlikely that we will be

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able to change the way we operate in a significant way. Further complications include configurations where grades 5 and 6 are taught by the same or a rotation of teachers. While we will continue to examine options at these levels the community should be aware there are significant challenges in following the guidelines and safety returning these students to more in person learning.

I am working with our faculty and staff to determine our best approach to returning more students to more in person learning. Some the things we are having to look closely at include:

- What will the impact of bringing all students back for more in person learning have on staffing levels?
- Do we have an adequate number of substitute teachers?
- Do we have enough space in classrooms/facilities to follow social distancing guidelines?
- Will we have sufficient air exchange?
- Can we follow the routines, practices, and procedures we have established with a significant increase in students?
- Do we have (can we procure) adequate cleaning supplies?
- What is the impact on the during school day cleaning requirements?
- What impact will an increase in students have on challenging areas such as bathrooms?
- What does food service look like with increased students in the building?
- What is the impact of increased students on our contact tracing logs?
- What is the implication of a change in schedule to students with individual plans?
- If different schools have different schedules based on different capacities what does that mean for shared staffing?
- Do we have the proper furniture for more students?
- How will increasing students impact transportation?
- What will the impact of increased students do to health screenings in the morning?
- What is the impact on less structured times like recess?

Please understand this is a work in progress. I wanted to share with you my current thinking. I'm planning to continue to work with our faculty and staff to develop a more detailed plan and timeline. In conversations with other districts most are targeting beginning more in person leaning for students starting in mid October to the beginning of November. I anticipate we will be similar. Any dates I've used in sharing my thinking in this letter should not be considered as set in stone rather they should be considered as a sketch of what could be. I think we are likely to have a pretty solid plan in place by next Wednesday, October 6th.

Thank you for your understanding and flexibility. I hope you appreciate our transparent approach.

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Community Meeting

Tonight's Community meeting will focus on how we are doing with the reopening, a discussion about my current thinking about bringing back more students for in person learning, and some talk about the calendar. As usual there will be a time for community members to ask questions and share their experiences. The access to the Superintendent's weekly Community Meeting is available below.

Wednesday, September 30, 2020, 6:00 p.m.

[Join with Google Meet](#)

meet.google.com/yzd-szwo-tqi

[Join by phone](#)

(US) +1 573-349-3062 PIN: 810 989 343#

**Please note tonight's Community meeting will be recorded and posted to the COVID 19 communications section of the GISU website

2020-2021 Calendar

I have received a couple of emails about the school calendar and specifically a request that we move professional development days to Wednesdays. I thought it would be helpful to provide a little context for the community.

The boards are the entities who approve the school calendars and a non-emergency change to the calendar (like a snow day) requires the boards' approval. A nuance that is somewhat unique to Islands is that each individual district school board adopts a calendar as opposed to the SU adopting a calendar. In the just over two years I've been with GISU we (the boards and I) have worked hard to make sure we have a common calendar across the Islands. Additionally by statute it is important to understand that each educational region in VT adopts a calendar that includes 175 common student days.

Generally, we have tried to align professional days to be convenient for families. Currently, they are 4 designated PD days left in the calendar

October 9 which is a Friday and when coupled with October 12 (Indigenous Peoples day) creates a 4 day weekend

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November 23 (Parent Conference day) Often Parent Conferences are done on other mornings and evenings. This is scheduled on the Monday before the rest of the week is off for Thanksgiving Break.

March 1 Is on the Monday at the end of February Break

March 19 Parent Conference which is a Friday, see above for more information about parent conferences.

I do agree that given our current configuration based on our response to COVID 19 that PD on Wednesday's might generally be less disruptive to the learning and teaching for most students. However because of the way these days are scheduled I'm concerned many families have planned their family calendar around the adopted calendar.

It does make sense to me to consider moving the March 19 parent conference day to Wednesday, March 17 (we will need a waiver from our educational region because March 17 is one of the 175 common student days) but because of the timing, I do not think it makes a lot of sense to make changes on the other days.

I believe the calendar will be discussed at each of the upcoming local board meetings.

Thank you for your persistence in reading this letter in its entirety . It is much longer than my usual weekly Community Letters. I do think it is important for the community to understand the challenges we are facing. I greatly appreciate the community members who have joined the weekly community forums and reached out in other ways to share their concerns, celebrations, and ideas. For me, the idea we will get through this together is much more than just words written in a letter or phrase thrown out at the end of a meeting; it is truly what is helping us all through these challenging times.

Thank you for working with us to support the GISU mission to ensure all members of the Grand Isle Supervisory Union Learning Community are curious, creative, courageous, and capable of pursuing their aspirations in a diverse and ever-changing world.

Sincerely,

Michael J. Clark

Michael J. Clark
Grand Isle Supervisory Union
Superintendent

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Bullet Points:

- We anticipate a plan by October 6th
- Safety for students, faculty, staff, and families is the most important aspect we will consider with our plan
- We will take a slow approach to bringing students back
- Some schools may be able to have more in person and some will not
- Once a grade level has come back more in person, there will no longer be a two day a week in person hybrid model
- A remote option will be available for all families
- There are many logistics that need to be figured out