

Dear Families,

As summer wanes and families prepare for the school year, I want to thank teachers, staff, and the board for all their help and support over the past many months in keeping the spirit of North Branch School alive and well. Last year was difficult - for teachers, students and families alike. We experienced unavoidable and quick decisions that impacted everyone we know and love in our school community. Our intention for the coming year is to be in person while using a multilayered mitigation strategy approach to staying safe. We learned a lot from last year, and as far as we know there were not any COVID19 cases that originated from NBS. Our goal is to repeat that.

This school year, we will continue to monitor health risks. We are aware of and concerned about COVID19 variants, and while our adult population is largely vaccinated, we believe that vaccines for children under twelve will not be available until December at the earliest. North Branch School strongly recommends that members of our community who are eligible for COVID19 vaccines seek them. We also encourage everyone to get a flu vaccine this fall. Medical experts have said that keeping normal flu season illness to a minimum will help schools to avoid disruptions in the coming school year. Families will be asked whether or not they or their eligible children have been vaccinated for COVID19. We will send out an addendum for our health record for children twelve and older, and also ask family members who are eligible for COVID19 vaccination about vaccine status. This information will be held in confidence internally, but it will help us to know if and when we need to quarantine children. Simply stated, the more we know the better. Families are not required to provide this information, but we would very much appreciate it.

Like last year, we ask families to be careful for the coming year. As school begins, your risk immediately becomes the risk of our school community, and we want very much to continue our safe record. Wearing masks in large public gatherings, even if vaccinated, is considered wise by medical experts at this time.

Our current strategies for the coming year are as follows:

- Students and adults will wear masks indoors at NBS until we get guidance otherwise from the CDC and the Blue Ridge Health District. We ask that masks be tight-fitting, three-layer cloth masks, or surgical type masks as recommended by the CDC. Single-layer neck gaiters do not suffice this year, as guidance has been clear that they do not meet the standards necessary for public places.
- Masking outdoors will be optional within cohorts, but because we value the opportunity for mixed-age children to play and work together, we will mask when there is mixing of cohorts, especially when there is strenuous physical activity.
- Guidelines from the CDC and Blue Ridge Health District recommend maintaining three feet of distance when possible, keeping doors and windows open, with hepa filters running in all classes and restrooms. We will continue these practices.
- We will hold many classes and have lunch and recess outside as weather permits.

- Students and staff will continue with frequent hand washing.
- If students forget a mask we will provide one.
- We will also continue to monitor the viral load in our area.

Guidance from health officials is clear that school should be in person; our experience from last school year has given us confidence that we can do this safely, and that children need to be in school. Doing this will require our community to be mindful in their personal, professional and school community lives.

In a coming letter we will provide information about pick up and drop off for the coming year. Teachers will send their greetings and supply lists to families. As I have talked with teachers this summer I can attest to the fact that we are all so excited to begin again. We look forward to seeing your children in person, to sharing adventures, to building community, and doing what we do best and with all our hearts - learning.

When students returned to school last spring there was a palpable sense of relief for our families, not to mention joy on the faces of our students. My own experience here has solidified my belief that NBS is an outstanding school. As always, what we do is always in concert with our community. Our families and children love learning, and we actively care for each other. I'm so proud of our school, and so grateful to be part of this loving school community.

Sincerely,  
Smith Coleman  
Head of School