



# OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

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## GOVERNING BOARD MEMBERS

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February 4, 2021

Dear Amphitheater Employees and Families:

Once again we find ourselves making a most difficult and polarizing decision: open our schools to in-person learning or continue providing education remotely. Making this decision has never been easy, as constituent sentiments and interests on the matter vary and many factors must be weighed. These factors include but are not limited to: health and safety metrics and guidance; educational quality; and the social-emotional wellbeing of students, staff and families. This letter will provide information on the factors which have been considered in the making of this most recent decision, but the bottom line is that we will adhere to the plan we announced a couple of weeks ago to open in a hybrid model on Feb. 15.

This will, of course, be our second shift into hybrid learning, and we are reviewing what we learned during the first quarter of the school year to identify and implement adjustments and improvements that can be made in our educational methods, content and quality. You will receive additional information about those changes in the future, but I want to spend some time in providing you with some other important information that has factored into the immediate decision to continue with reopening our schools in hybrid mode.

## Surveys

I want to thank all the families and employees who participated in the surveys we sent last week; the responses were invaluable in helping us understand what our community wants and needs in these ever-evolving and changing circumstances. We will share more detailed results from those surveys at Tuesday's Governing Board meeting, but here is a snapshot of trends in the responses thus far:

### Families

Nearly 4,000 families responded. Of those responding:

- About 26 percent indicated a preference to remain in our current "Remote by Necessity" model;
- About 26 percent stated a preference for returning to the Hybrid model;
- 40 percent prefer full-time in-person; and
- Approximately 8 percent prefer ongoing and separate online instruction.

Amphitheater High School • Canyon del Oro High School • Ironwood Ridge High School  
Amphitheater Middle School • Coronado K-8 School • Cross Middle School • La Cima Middle School • Wilson K-8 School  
Copper Creek Elementary • Donaldson Elementary • Harelson Elementary • Holaway Elementary • Innovation Academy • Keeling Elementary  
Mesa Verde Elementary • Nash Elementary • Painted Sky Elementary • Prince Elementary • Rio Vista Elementary • Walker Elementary • Rillito Center

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### Employees

About 1,200 of our District employees have responded to the survey. Of those responding:

- 52 percent indicated a preference to remain in “Remote by Necessity”;
- 27 percent stated a preference for Hybrid learning at this time;
- 19 percent prefer full-time in-person learning; and
- about 2 percent prefer ongoing and separate online learning only.

At first glance, it would appear there is a large disparity between the opinions of families and employees, but the reasons for differences are not as obvious. One thing is clear based on the comments received from both surveys: parents and families all want what is best for children.

Another thing became evident in our staff surveys which may at least partially explain the differences of opinion regarding the current Remote by Necessity model. Many teachers who expressed a preference for the model said they did so because they are seeing improved student engagement and attendance in this mode than they saw during the hybrid model. Teachers said they feel they are connecting better with their students in the current model because they are seeing them every day, and the students are seeing their classmates every day -- albeit on a computer screen.

Not surprisingly, most families who preferred student learning at school and in-person are motivated by the very same issues; they expressed strong desires to see their children to learn, engage and connect as they believe children only can when at school.

### **Shared Priorities**

It remains as clear as ever that we all want children back in school, because we all generally recognize that children have suffered, both academically and socially. There is a common understanding on a national level that the mental health and well-being of our students is a top concern. That shared concern is a big driver in the growing public beliefs that schools must reopen and do so sooner rather than later. Students need to see their teachers and school support staff and their friends. And, we have also found that most of our staff expressed being happier, less isolated, and more optimistic when our children were at school. Again, we can all agree on these things.

The discussion and beliefs regarding personal safety, however, are more divergent. Some employees and parents express worries about potential health implications for themselves, or for their families and students, should schools move toward reopening. Concerns of this nature have been present throughout this pandemic of course, but when public health metrics began skyrocketing after the holidays such concerns became more widespread and more intense. This continues to be reflected in our most recent surveys, particularly among our employee responses, and I hear those same concerns in my direct conversations with employees as well.

I wholly appreciate those concerns, and I cannot help but feel conflicted when I hear them. But I am also greatly encouraged and reassured by health officials at the local, state and national levels who are all becoming more and more consistent and vocal regarding the fast pace with which things are improving and all seemingly emphasizing that, even with public health metric measures being of concern, schools are able to open and operate safely – some experts even denoting that our schools are safer than our private homes.

### **Shared Concerns**

We cannot ignore, however, that the disease and its impact continue to impact so many in so many negative ways. Yes, the vaccines have become the proverbial light at the end of our long tunnel. But the impression that all school staff are already wholly protected through COVID-19 vaccinations and should therefore be less concerned about returning to in-person learning would be an unfair one to glean. We still have some distance to go in our vaccinations after local stumbles. We all hoped that we would be further along in vaccinations by this point, but the process has been slower than anticipated, and we must appreciate that many remain very anxious about vaccination progress.

### **Vaccinations**

We are currently conducting an employee survey to gauge staff access to vaccinations. While it is ongoing, the data currently shows that about 60 percent of our certified staff (which includes teachers) have had or are scheduled to have their first vaccination in the near future. The number is lower for support staff (which includes other school employees, bus drivers, office staff, District staff, etc.). About 35 percent of those employees have received or are scheduled for vaccinations soon. We anticipate sharing more information about this survey at next week's Governing Board meeting as well.

Please also note that while one vaccination does provide some significant protection, a second dose is necessary to get to the high effective rates we have all read about. Studies have shown that the immunity protection takes about two weeks to process in the human body. That means that the full protection kicks in at least two weeks after the second shot.

That being said, the director of the Centers for Disease Control recently said that full vaccination status is not necessary to safely open schools.

### **Shared Commitment**

What *is necessary* to safely reopen schools is the vigilant and continuing practice of protective health and safety measures which effectively impedes community spread, reduces strains on hospitals and health resources, and provides the opportunity to regain normalcy in our lives.

Our 10 weeks in hybrid mode this past fall bear this out. We had very little spread in schools throughout that period of time. Amphitheater instituted consistent safety protocols District-wide, and our schools undertook significant changes and efforts on their individual campuses to keep students and staff safe. Our efforts in these respects helped us earn the Pima County Ready for You certification, a designation that recognizes that we have appropriate safety procedures in place. Additionally, we are asking everyone in the Amphitheater community to do their part to help us stay open and, hopefully, open more fully:

- Stay at least 6 feet apart from others at all times
- Wear a mask
- Wash your hands
- Don't touch your face
- Get a vaccine if you are eligible and are able
- **Stay home if you are sick or have any COVID-like symptoms.**

Thank you, families and staff, for doing all you can to support our students, our community and to support each other. We often speak in terms of what we will do when the pandemic is over. Alas, it seems that an end is not in sight, but we can all definitely see better times ahead on the horizon, and that gives me hope for continued steps to normalcy – or at the very least a happier “new normal”.

I wish you all good health as we continue to take care of one another.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Todd A. Jaeger". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'T'.

Todd A. Jaeger, J.D.  
Superintendent