

8/26/20 Update

Dear Families,

For families/students choosing Hybrid-Flex, students will be divided into two groups. Each group will be in school for approximately 3 to 3.5 hours per day, two days each week. Group "A" will attend school in-person on Monday and Wednesday. Group "B" will attend school in-person on Tuesday and Thursday. Both groups will be expected to participate in Distance-Learning activities during each of the three days that they are not on campus. Details will be coming soon regarding the type of work and expectations for students during Distance-Learning days.

Families and students are not choosing group A or B, as those groups will be assigned according to the master schedule and families will be notified soon regarding which schedule they are assigned. Families are actually choosing either Hybrid-Flex or Distance-Learning. As of today, we have determined that families have chosen Hybrid-Flex or Distance-Learning from the answers they provided on the recent surveys. If you have not declared through the surveys which option is best for your family to begin the year, you need to contact the school and declare your option by this coming Friday, August 28th by 3 pm. Families who may also be unsure or would like to change their previous choice from the survey should also contact the school by the same date and time. Once we have collected that information, schedules will be finalized and sent out next week.

Thank you for your patience and cooperation during this trying time.

Tom Kearney

8/25/20 Update

Hello. Here is a quick update as to where we currently are in planning for the upcoming year. Today, based on the surveys and direct communication we have had with all of you, we compiled a bus list and have submitted it for routing. We are confident that the district will get this routing done in short order and we should be able to start school in person for hybrid students as scheduled on September 8th. Of course there is a chance the routing runs into trouble and we could possibly have to begin in distance learning mode, but let's stay optimistic.

The staff and I are working on developing the protocols and policies about how to conduct school safely. You will get more information as things get solidified. We know there will be new rules about drop off and pick up, and who is allowed in the building. We have to minimize the number of people coming and going for safety reasons. We are also going to be strictly limiting things that kids can bring to school. We will be starting with 3 to 3 1/2 hour days for 2 days per week, so there is no room for toys, playing cards, games, etc. We also can't have our students sharing items, so we are developing a system for kids to store their school belongings in bins to leave in the classroom as we won't be using lockers. We need to limit the number of things we have to sanitize each night, so lockers are out of the question.

None of us chose to live in a Covid world. This is causing all sorts of issues for everyone, but we still believe we have to try to create a safe and meaningful school experience. Whereas I recognize that many of you are becoming less patient because you need to know how to plan,

you hopefully understand that our situation is fluid and changing by the day. Before we could even begin to establish a realistic plan, we had to wait for the governor and we also had to get in line with our district because they provide the transportation service our students rely on. After those organizations established their plans, we reacted. So while our plan seems late in coming, it is partly because we needed to understand the plans of others that affect us. So we are now getting closer to fully knowing when school will start, what time of day, how many days per week, who is on what day, who is staying home altogether, and what our special services are going to look like.

I hope that tomorrow I can send you a schedule that will show what your student(s) days on campus will look like. You will want to note that your choice will be in place for the month of September and you can only change from distance learning to hybrid in person once at the end of each month. We will allow students to move from hybrid to distance learning at any point literally over night though for what should seem to be obvious reasons. Most school systems are holding families to the decision for at least a quarter and some are making it for the entire year. We are being more flexible than that, but you should really choose your plan wisely. Call me if you would like to chat about.

That is all I have for today. The teachers came back to the building yesterday for the first time since March. It's good to be collaborating in person again. This staff is dedicated to making the school year work for your children no matter what. We will do our part and trust that you will do yours too. I am sorry that we are unable to host our annual open house this year, but hopefully soon this thing will pass and we can gather at the school again' that will be quite a celebration! So good night for now and watch for further correspondence coming to you as soon as tomorrow. We are here working very hard and we are excited to see our students return.

Tom Kearney

8/19/20 Update

Dear New Heights Families, **PLEASE READ THIS ENTIRE MESSAGE AS IT CONTAINS VERY IMPORTANT DETAILS!**

I want to begin by thanking you for your having trust in the school to either continue at New Heights or for placing your trust in us for the first time by enrolling your child during these unusual times in our world's history. Second, I want to apologize for the delay in our late summer communication. Normally by now you would have received a fall packet with all sorts of instructions and guidelines, as well as lunch applications, menus, clothing guidelines and shopping lists for classroom supplies. The reasons for the delay are probably obvious, but I will share my thoughts to clarify.

A few weeks ago, I notified you of the (late in coming) governor's plan and how the number of positive Covid 19 cases per county would dictate the mode schools within each county could operate in. For example, schools, depending on the number of positive cases, may be able to open fully for all students, fully for elementary but hybrid for secondary, hybrid for all, or distance-learning for all. At that time, schools based in Washington County could have opened fully for elementary and hybrid for secondary. Although New Heights would be allowed to open fully for elementary, we subsequently learned that our resident district, Stillwater, who also provides our transportation, intends to open hybrid for all, which means New Heights would also

have to open hybrid for all because Stillwater won't bus our students more than their own students for obvious reasons, meaning our only true options are distance-learning or hybrid for all-just the same as Stillwater's schools.

Since all of that information became available we went to work assuming to open in a hybrid model as discussed, but as of last week we learned that the district is still engaged in some level of debate at the school board level as to how they intend to open in September. The Stillwater school board held a special meeting on Friday afternoon to finally agree and decide how to open, but did not make a final decision, meaning the start of the school year is still undecided. We have already delayed the start of the year until September 8th, and we won't officially know what the district is going to do until tomorrow evening and the decision will impact our families as well because of transportation.

Since this crisis began, I watch dozens of hours of news coverage per week, I read articles about Covid-19 to understand how the spread is impacting the world, I participate in several Zoom meetings with other school leaders to collaborate and hear about ideas on safely opening schools, and recently I have been paying particular attention to areas that have already opened for school in other parts of the country, paying particular note to the things that haven't gone as hoped and planned. I have been trying to configure a strategy with the most beneficial scenario for opening school as safely as possible. I know that the district has concerns about what transportation is going to look like, and that it may take weeks before things get ironed out. The entire education community is still trying to put safety measures in place in the schools, but we also know that once kids come into the schools, plans will only account for so much. We know that many of you are going to opt for distance-learning to give you time to see how things are going, and once it is demonstrated that we can offer a safe school experience, you may likely want to return your kids to in-person schooling and keep inching toward a more "normal" life. We completely understand that. Others want their kids in school now. They want their kids to get the most out of the school experience and they believe that optimal benefits won't occur unless their kids are actually in school. For many, distance-learning didn't go very well last spring and the thought of another year like that may be almost unbearable; a point we also completely understand.

So in order to make the most informed decision, we recently put out a survey to all families and gathered as much information as we felt we needed to get ready for the school year, and despite gathering that data, things have continued to change just as I suggested they might in a recent correspondence to our families. The Covid 19 issue is fluid, meaning it continues to move in all directions quite rapidly. The number accelerated a full point since last week and more school systems in the state are starting to declare distance-learning for all, including St. Paul, Mpls, Bloomington, Roseville, and many charters around the state have also declared distance-learning, while Stillwater is still trying to decide.

So, hopefully this will at least help to explain all that we are considering and why the decision to open in hybrid hasn't fully been announced, as well as why we haven't sent the packet with supply lists yet. We don't want you out shopping for items your kids may not need until we are able to be back at school as normally designed. All of these reasons are leading me to offer this possible solution to the start of the school year. At this point, we are inclined to opt for a slow approach, which would mean starting all students in a flexible hybrid model for the month of September. This morning I was able to secure an assurance from transportation that New Heights can carve out a "skinny" schedule, meaning students will be able to come to school

for approximately 3 hours per day 2 days per week rather than to attend 6.5 hours per day 2 days per week. We will be able to arrange a schedule for students and families that makes more sense for our school because we are smaller, more relational, and we are better able to address our students' needs more quickly simply because we have fewer students in our school. By starting this way, we would allow for the district to iron out its transportation issues, which currently looks like it is going to be a huge problem. New Heights students would be transported later in the morning after the other schools have been dropped off and would then be transported home before the other schools. To a degree, New Heights would have its own routes and each student will have his or her own assigned seat, which should give our families comfort. Starting the year this way would also allow us to observe and learn from the other local schools, especially in terms of anticipated and unanticipated issues they encounter. This could include issues relating to masks, meals, transportation, Covid-19 cases both accurately and falsely identified, quarantining students, teachers and staff issues, issues related to sanitizing the building effectively, and we will also learn about peoples' true comfort and concerns about attending school after they experience it for a few days rather than just guess about how it might go. We feel it will be better to phase the start of the year in rather than start with full days not knowing confidently what to expect.

In different form from last spring, we are now able to allow small groups of kids into the school for services, especially students who need more personal attention. For those who will opt to come to school, it will likely be for two days per week for approximately 3 hours per day (10am to 1pm). Some families may still opt for distance-learning, but they could still schedule times to come to school and interact with the teachers they most need assistance from by making an appointment during the week. Depending on the needs of any student, we would be able to schedule an appointment either virtually or in person here at the school in order to get those needs met. We know that every student won't need to be here during this time, so opening slowly with partial days during the month of September would allow the school to continue to observe and learn from our neighboring districts assuming they remain open, we can continue to train our students and families here at the school on Google Classroom and help them to navigate through the technical aspects that make distance-learning difficult, but also provide opportunities for our struggling and more "challenged" students to get some specialized assistance in person as their family's schedules permit. This option is sort of a "hybrid flex," meaning those who need to be at school more can come in with a fixed schedule 2 days per week for 3 hours or as needed by appointment.

Let's face it, the situation we are in isn't a good one by any standard. We all wish life could return to normal very soon. We realize there are competing opinions out there; some are pushing for schools to open full-time, while others seem to insist we keep a safe distance from others and stick to ourselves until Covid 19 is gone. It is troubling that we have not been able to agree and come together with an actual solution, but that can't paralyze us to the point where we do nothing at all. In my thinking, we need to get students back in school, but I also believe we should phase it in slowly by starting with a few days per week and for shorter days until we get a true sense of how it is going.

Early tomorrow you will get a new brief survey asking which option you will opt to take. We ask that you strongly consider the options provided and try to make the best choice for your family knowing that September is going to be a trial month. We will tabulate the responses rapidly and reconstruct a schedule to begin as soon as possible. We may have to start the first week with

distance- learning for all, but that is unclear today because I have to hear from families one more time through the survey before making the schedule.

To conclude, below is a list of things that are going to occur over the next week to ten days so you will understand what is coming up.

- Stillwater School Board meets this Thursday (tomorrow) to decide what mode to open with September 8th. This decision has a huge impact on what New Heights does to start the year.
- If Stillwater is to open hybrid, New Heights will open Hybrid, but with shorter days (approximately 3 hrs.)
- Families will complete the new survey ASAP to provide New Heights with each family's preference to begin. Survey will come to you tomorrow morning.
- New Heights will tabulate responses and reconstruct the schedule for September and the schedule will be communicated to families likely early next week.
- A supply list will be generated and sent to families as soon as possible
- All schools and families are continuing to monitor Covid 19 numbers knowing school could be forced to distance-learning mode for all quite quickly.
- Families can continue to come to school for Google Classroom Training as needed-more trainings can be scheduled to meet demand.
- New Heights teachers report back full-time Monday August 24 and will be getting ready for Hybrid
- Safety and health protocols are still in development.

Thank you again for your understanding and patience. I do not expect all families to love this plan, but I do ask that all families try to understand that this issue is extremely taxing and difficult on all of us. I really believe that this temporary approach may be the most sensible of all options I have heard of so far. We are eager to get your survey responses and we are even more eager to see your children back at school again in only a few weeks.

Thomas Kearney-Principal & Superintendent