



SPPS Staff Forum Q&A

March 11, 2021

[Watch a recording of the live meeting here.](#)

Q: How has the pandemic altered, changed or helped reimagine the district's strategic plan? What lessons did we learn and what are some things we will do differently as a district moving forward?

A: Our Board of Education recently approved our application to the Minnesota Department of Education to host an online school. The application actually began in October 2019 and was only accelerated due to the pandemic. We implemented electronic time cards. We were forced to the cloud for many essential functions in our district and with the launch of our PeopleSoft update, there will be even greater opportunities for us to incorporate technology into our business and operations functions.

We will have continued opportunities to draw on this past year. Virtual meetings are here to stay. Whether planned or not, to effectively engage with colleagues in the area, throughout the state and country has been invaluable. Now, we have to push ourselves to replace the topic of COVID-19 and continue to challenge ourselves with all of the complex challenges that exist in better serving our students, staff and communities. We would also enjoy hearing from you all and our community as we continue to plan for our future.

Q: What will it take to provide hot lunch to students in the building during their time in school? I am also wondering why we can't call a snack a snack?

A: Secondary schools got to choose which model they wanted to implement for lunch when students return. Different schools have different needs based on the number of students learning in person, space considerations, and their school's schedule. Some schools will serve hot lunch, and others will have bagged lunch to eat at school or take home to eat.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the agency that oversees our school nutrition programs. By definition, a snack includes two food items served together. Breakfast and lunch include four and five foods; respectively.

Q: What is the plan for meals for students who will be participating in Virtual Learning School?



A: All VLS students are invited to participate in our weekly meal box program. School pickup and home delivery options are offered to SPPS students who are not receiving meals at school. More information is available at spps.org/2021meals.

Q: What are we doing to address the virtual learning attendance issue? What is the district doing to hold parents and students accountable for attendance in virtual learning? Having parents and students check in themselves for attendance has not worked. Students mark themselves present, but do not log in to learn or attend Google Meets. There have been students we have not seen all school year long.

A: The expectation is that school staff continue to reach out to families of students that have not attended synchronous sessions or submitted work to identify the barriers to consistent attendance and engagement with schools. Students that check in, but have not submitted assignments on Seesaw or Schoology, are similar to when a student attends school physically, but does not engage in lessons or complete work. We do not want to take a punitive or harmful approach to this issue, but rather support interventions such as home visits, referral to community agencies, referral to the school's Mental Health Support Team and/or Student Assistant team. Throughout distance learning, we continue to have SPPS staff that work in the School Attendance Matters (SAM) program, in partnership with the Ramsey County Attorney's Office (RCAO). Both SPPS and RCAO are extremely hesitant to engage in filing court petitions or criminalize families for attendance concerns during a global pandemic. However, we are engaging in School Attendance Review Team meetings with Ramsey County, where again, the focus is on reducing the barriers to attendance.

Q: How can an elementary teacher, who is teaching virtually, serve all students well without the supports that were given during virtual learning before return or in-person learning? There is no longer time for assistants to be a part of the morning meetings, to assist with assessments, PBIS or parent updates. I am working every day of the week (including weekends) 7-8 hours a day, but still cannot manage all of the differentiated needs.

A: We recognize that the shifts in learning formats take time to adjust to. Support staff at schools should have schedules designed to support in-person and virtual students throughout the week. Though this may look different to the daily routines of the fall, support for students whether in virtual or in-person are to remain available.

Q: Are the Virtual Learning School students as much of a priority as the in-person students at the secondary level? It seems like they will be getting less than they already are because their parents chose to keep their kids home to be safe.



A: Our secondary in-person model is designed to make sure all students maintain their current courses in order to stay on their path to graduation. Students are expected to be able to stay with their same teachers and cohorts of students whether they are in-person or in virtual learning. Students in virtual learning will have daily access to their teachers and prioritized access to teachers on Fridays.

Q: Ever since last spring when the shutdown started, there has been a directive for schools to create a Virtual Learning School for our students. Students have been repeatedly asked to enroll, which they did. Now starting in April, our secondary buildings have to struggle to teach two formats. Why wasn't a VLS set up?

A: The decision to begin the year in distance learning for all students was a collective decision that had input from teachers, principals and district leaders. The design of virtual learning for secondary students was reviewed and revised with teacher input during the fall to create the in-person support model that began in February. As we move to in-person learning for the last quarter of the year, the continuity of student course offerings toward their graduation plans and their relationship with their peers and teachers were also prioritized. A separate VLS for secondary is complicated by the varying teaching licenses, and redoing schedules at this point in the school year would cause more disruption for students than keeping them with their current teachers and classes.

Q: Why are middle and high schools only going to school for 4.5 hours a day with Fridays off?

A: Districts throughout Minnesota were provided the autonomy to determine what in-person learning would look like. Our secondary design team, which is comprised of site leaders, Saint Paul Federation of Teachers representation and numerous district departments, believed it was very important to provide an instructional in-person opportunity for students that would allow for the highest degree of: continuity for students to maintain their same teachers; continuity for students to maintain the same schedule of classes; continuity for students to stay within their same school; and continuity for maintaining the relationships students and educators have developed this year.

The 4.5-hour schedule allows for the continuity that we believe is so important for students and staff. The hours also allow us to be very intentional about separating the “doing two jobs” concerns that many districts are experiencing with their teachers. By designing our schedule this way, we are providing intentional time for our students who opted for virtual learning to maintain continuity of their teachers, course offerings and remain connected to their school.



The in-person schedule allows our secondary schools to support the scheduling complexities, as well as maintain the identified continuity we believe is important for both in-person and virtual learning students. By using a 4.5-hour day we not only allow our virtual learners to have synchronous time each day, we also allow our in-person students to be on-site four days a week, rather than 2-3 days a week like many hybrid models.

Q: If students are to take the MCA tests when returning to in-person learning in the fourth quarter, how are we making it equitable if virtual students don't have to take them?

A: We are expected to administer the MCA. Virtual Learning School is an option for learning at home, but it is not an automatic opt-out of testing. Students in VLS will be expected to take the MCA. Opting out of the MCA is an option for all families without regard to their chosen learning model.

Q: Will the expectation be that all students who opt-in for secondary in-person learning must be in the building all at the same time Monday-Thursday? Or can buildings plan to have a certain grade level in the building to help reduce the exposure in the classrooms and hallway?

A: Building leadership teams and staff have been working, and will continue to work through the April 14 start date, to make sure students can be present in the building safely. One strategy some schools are using is to stagger the time students exit classrooms and move through the hallways at passing times. Strategies like this and more will be implemented to address these and other concerns.

Q: Why are schools and programs not allowed to purchase their own air purifiers?

A: Supplemental air purifiers are not critical to ensure adequate ventilation system mitigation in our schools. Every space that is used for teaching is supplied with fresh, filtered air through the mechanical system. In any space where there is any historic air sampling data that indicates the mechanical system may not be able to provide the level of fresh, filtered air that we would like, the district has already purchased and placed supplemental HEPA air purifiers out of an abundance of caution. There is lots of information on the [SPPS Reopen](#) website about how the [Facilities](#) team is trying to reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission through improved Indoor Air Quality, as it is a complex and multifaceted approach.

Q: When will staff receive N95 masks? Are they still impossible to come by?

A: Staff have access to N95 masks if their jobs require it, based on guidance from the Minnesota Department of Health. As these are critical supplies for the healthcare industry,



school districts do have limited access to N95s specifically, so it's important to ensure the ones we do have go to those whose jobs require it. Please note that there are a plethora of other PPE options to ensure staff can work safely, all based on the specific needs of your job.

Q: Can we be provided with Lysol spray for our individual classrooms and office to spray after each class period and one-on-ones in the support staff's offices (Principals, counselors, nurses, behavioral specialists, social workers, etc.)?

A: Every classroom and office is provided with disinfectant wipes and staff are welcome to request a spray bottle with disinfectant. Please work with your building's Head Engineer to get supplies. We are not recommending use of, nor using any aerosolized sprays or disinfectants other than what our custodial staff are using.

Q: What can we do about children who are not wearing masks?

A: In general, we always want to take a preventive, educational and restorative approach to this type of behavior. This means we want to develop proactive and student-centered interventions to increase student's compliance in wearing a mask. This would include attempting to identify why they are refusing to wear the mask and re-teaching reasons for the mask requirement. A school may engage the support of a counselor or social worker to help develop a positive behavior intervention plan. For example, most kids are more likely to wear a mask that they like, scheduling "mask breaks" during the day, do we need to re-explain why we all need to wear a mask, have a trusted adult check in with the student throughout the day, genuine positive feedback when they do wear the mask, etc. As a district, we strongly discourage suspending students for not wearing a mask, rather we want to partner with families to address the issue.

Q: I am wondering where 3 feet of distancing came from? I thought 6 feet of distancing was "safe." How does safety at 3 feet distancing compare to 6 feet distancing? What is the science supporting (or not supporting) 3 feet distancing?

A: Three feet of physical distancing was added on December 17, 2020 for elementary (strongly recommended) and on February 17, 2021 for secondary schools (required) in the [Minnesota Safe Learning Plan](#).

Q: How many SPSS classrooms have had to quarantine since the return to in-person teaching?

A: We post weekly COVID-19 reports and positive cases on our [SPSS COVID-19 Dashboard](#). Students and staff who are deemed close contacts and required to quarantine receive a notification, and others in the affected building, bus or program may receive a notice of low risk.



Q: If I have an official COVID-19 ADA from Human Resources, will it be assumed that I am going back with the rest of the staff in my school on April 12, or am I exempt from having to return?

A: Please work with your HR consultant to confirm your work status and expectations about returning in person or continuing to work virtually.

Q: Knowing that many families and students will travel over spring break, why are you not waiting for after the recommended quarantine period to bring secondary students back in-person?

A: Unnecessary travel is highly discouraged by the Centers for Disease Control and Minnesota Department of Health. SPPS has been sharing this message with families on a regular basis and encouraging them to stay close to home over spring break. Regular COVID-19 testing is also strongly recommended for families learning in person, including before and after travel.

Q: Why were secondary school parents & students not informed sooner that they would need to re-enroll in Virtual Learning School?

A: Secondary families were given the same amount of time as elementary families to enroll in virtual learning once the return to in-person announcement was made. Based on learnings from the elementary VLS registration process, it was determined that starting over with registrations would be the most accurate and effective way to ensure enrollments were accurate and up to date.

Q: Why has there been so little communication with families & students regarding returning to in-person? Does SPPS plan to increase their communication?

A: In addition to communication from the district, each secondary school was charged with holding two virtual meetings for families between the initial announcement and spring break. Many schools sent additional email newsletters, robocalls, posted information on their websites and created their own YouTube videos with school-specific information for families.

Q: Will schools & programs be allowed to hold in-person events during the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year? Ex. Graduations, celebrations, powwows?

A: Decisions regarding extracurricular activities, graduation and other will be communicated as soon as they are finalized.



Q: Will SPPS share COVID-19 related numbers with staff, families & the public? This can be done without violating HIPAA, no names or identifying information needs to be shared. We should know if there have been people in our buildings who have tested positive so that staff & families can make decisions regarding being in-person.

A: The [SPPS COVID-19 Dashboard](#) is updated daily on a one-day lag. Building and class-level information is not shared beyond those individuals who are deemed close contacts and need to quarantine. Staff in a building with a positive case also receive a notification of low risk.

Q: Will secondary students be allowed to switch to Virtual Learning School after March 11?

A: Yes, families can request to switch into virtual learning at any time, but cannot switch from virtual learning to in-person due to space limitations and social distancing requirements.

Q: Will COVID-19 vaccinations be required for students or staff in the future?

A: Getting vaccinated is a personal decision. SPPS has encouraged all staff who want a vaccine to get vaccinated, but it is not a requirement.

Q: What is SPPS doing to reach out to the diverse communities that the district serves?

A: All district communication is available in English, Spanish, Hmong, Somali and Karen. The Office of Family Engagement engages directly with families and assists with connecting them to services and resources in their native language. Individual schools have their own resources to connect with their families as well. More information is available at spps.org/engagement.

Q: Once we return to in-person learning & work, will community members be able to come into the SPPS buildings? Some programs offer services to families and would like to return to offering those services in-person.

A: Partner organizations with current, written and executed agreements with the district may be allowed to have staff work on-site under specific circumstances. Please consult with your building's administrators with specific questions. At this time, parents, volunteers and other non-essential visitors are not allowed in SPPS buildings.

Q: What is being done to ensure the safety of students and staff returning to in-person at Creative Arts Secondary School? Will students continue being transported by school buses or will they be expected to use public transportation?



A: Students in grades 9-12 at Creative Arts will be using transit “Go To” cards to get to/from school. Middle school students will be riding yellow school buses to/from school.