

Dear Columbia Falls School Families,

As we have now completed the first quarter of school, I wanted to share with you some important information and communicate clearly on several areas that have recently come to my attention. I know that this has been a most difficult time for our students and their families, and I hope this letter finds you well.

At the school board meeting on Monday, the administrative team made a recommendation to take two hours each Wednesday, instead of one hour, for early release until at least the end of the first semester. The school board unanimously approved this change to our weekly schedule. Buses will run their regular routes, but begin picking up students an hour early. **These are the dismissal times starting next Wednesday, November 18th. Note: these times are for Wednesdays only. Our Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday dismissals will remain the same.**

CFHS- 1:12 p.m.

CFJH- 1:25 p.m.

Glacier Gateway Elementary-1:20 p.m.

Ruder Elementary- 1:25 p.m.

This request was made to give our faculty more time for a number of pandemic related reasons. These include:

- planning for remote and synchronous learning
- one on one meetings with remote learners and those out on home-bound absences
- in person meetings with struggling students
- lesson planning
- technology learning and implementation
- curriculum planning
- meetings with parents to assist with home bound and remote learners
- other tasks that are related to the difficulties of educating students during the pandemic of Covid-19

We understand that scheduling changes can be difficult for our families. In making this decision, we determined that this approach, which has been adopted by many local school districts, was the best option to provide effective learning opportunities to students while minimizing to the extent possible the impact on families in the district.

Pandemic news-

As you may be aware, we have been updating our cases and quarantines on our website each Thursday. It should be noted that those statistics do not tell the whole story about what is happening in our schools. The website charts are an attempt to show the community spread within the school. Not shown are the students that are quarantined by a case at home, of which there are many. This, as well

as the cases, quarantines, and symptomatic individuals have caused us to have a number of Homebound Absences within our schools. We do have some community spread within the schools, though at this point, it is hard to trace and seems to be worsening. As some of you are aware, some of the community spread has been through contacts in school activities, and not in the classrooms.

I am often asked what will be the reason that schools are closed and how long those closures might last. In my many discussions with our health professionals and educators throughout the county, state, and national, it is very difficult to use one set of metrics to determine the closure. *We will determine closures on one of the following scenarios: 1.) our inability to deliver services due to staff shortages in a classroom, grade level, building or district. 2.) A large number of cases within a classroom, grade level, building or within the district, especially if we could not keep up with the close contact tracing.* This large number would be determined on a case by case basis. For example, Whitefish had 15 cases on a weekend, with 9 cases at Whitefish Middle School. This caused their school to go to remote learning for 8 days. Great Falls High had 10 cases in one day and over 200 close contacts, so they had a temporary closure. As we learn more about the disease and its consequences, we continue to monitor how to react when large numbers of cases arise.

As a community, we need to be prepared for moving to remote learning at any time due to Covid-19 situations.

Currently, the junior high is on remote instruction due to short staffing in the building. We have a great need for substitutes throughout the district. We have been covering a number of teacher absences throughout the fall in all of our schools, but we reached a critical number at CFJH that we could not replace. A decision will be made on Friday, but it looks likely that remote learning will continue because many of those staff members are out due to positive cases or close contact quarantines and are not yet scheduled to return.

Today, we have over 100 students out for illness, positive Covid cases, or close contact quarantines at CFHS. Before moving to remote learning, CFJH also had over 100 students out. Three entire kindergarten classes are out on quarantine. We have had 9 positive cases at the high school over a five day period, with two cases causing around 50 students to miss school as close contacts. Every day brings new challenges, with teaching staff and administrators also being identified as close contacts and confirmed cases.

We continue to follow the rules and guidance for close contact quarantines, set by the Centers for Disease Control, the State of Montana, and the Flathead City County Health Department. The 14 day quarantine is required for school districts to follow. We also are following the recommendations of medical professionals with regard to asymptomatic and symptomatic students, taking the precautions to avoid Covid-19 infections.

I continue to work with local government officials, school superintendents, and medical professionals to garner the latest information and strategies for dealing with these complex and sometimes confusing issues. Unfortunately, the pandemic and its repercussions have detracted from our mission in schools--educating children.

Please be mindful that to keep our schools open, we need everyone's cooperation and assistance. We obviously want to keep our kids in school, and our larger community's efforts to stop the spread by wearing masks, hand hygiene, and social distancing will help. Thanks in advance for your cooperation.

Facility update-

As you are likely aware, the bond that passed in October of 2019 had four main elements: a new Glacier Gateway Elementary building, a remodel of Ruder Elementary, a remodel to create a secure entryway at Columbia Falls Junior High, and a multi-use fields project on district property between Ruder and CFJH.

The order of the projects was determined by the long range planning committee, which consisted of board members, administration, faculty, and numerous community members.

The *multi-use fields project* was the least impactful on school operations and was started immediately. That project has been completed, though several dry wells (for drainage) which were eliminated through advised budget cuts will likely be installed when the fields are established. The engineers for the project will determine the need for the wells and will make a recommendation in the spring. These fields will be used for soccer, football, and lacrosse, plus other activities as available.

The *Ruder project* got an early start due to our move to remote learning last spring. This project is nearing the "dried in" phase, where construction crews can work inside over the winter for completion. This project also fits within the bond budget, with the school board looking at allocating money that has already been approved to upgrading the HVAC system in the southeast quadrant of the building for long term sustainability. Again, that is not additional funding, but money that will be allocated to ensure that part of the building can last another 40-50 years. This updated facility will be a great addition to our schools and community.

The *CFJH project* is waiting for the arrival of materials and will be accomplished during the Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks.

The *Glacier Gateway project* was slated to be the last to actually begin construction, since the design phase, with its many elements, takes a number of months to complete. The design is nearing completion, the project will go out to bid late winter/early spring, and construction will begin this coming spring. At our last board meeting, the architects presented the preliminary drawings, and we are excited to see this excellent facility completed for our students and community. At this time, our tentative construction schedule has structure completion by the summer of 2022, followed by the demolition of the north wing of Glacier Gateway and the installation of the parking lot. The plan is to move into the new building in the fall of 2022, barring unforeseen delays.

Thanks for your continuing support of our schools.

Sincerely,

Dave Wick

Superintendent, School District 6