



Think. Learn. **Grow.**

December 28, 2020

Dr. Ann Lebo
Director, Iowa Department of Education
Grimes State Office Building
400 E. 14th Street
Des Moines, IA 50319

Dear Director Lebo,

The Board of Education of the Des Moines Independent Community School District requests the approval of the Iowa Department of Education for the District to resume continuous, required online means of instruction beginning Monday, January 4, 2021, for grades 2 through 12 for one week. The DMPS Board plans to continue to monitor COVID-19 conditions in Polk County and in DMPS schools, as it has been since this summer, in an effort to ensure the safety and health of the 32,500 students and 5,000 staff and their families. We will resume our compliant hybrid model for grades preschool through 1st on January 4.

The District's intent is that 100% in-person instruction resumes as soon as it is safe to do so and agrees that the presumed method of instruction during the 2020-2021 school year will be primarily in-person, local conditions relating to COVID-19 allowing. However, the Board is exceedingly concerned about the safety and well-being of its students and employees based on conditions in Des Moines and Polk County at the present time. The Board believes at this time that the rates of COVID-19 transmission in Des Moines and Polk County are so high as to render in-person instruction an unreasonable risk to the well-being of our students and staff. As noted by the CDC, "schools reopening may further increase spread in communities where transmission is already high." See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/reopening-schools-faqs.html>.

The District acknowledges that the DE/IDPH advisory guidelines indicate that school closures will not be contemplated until positivity rates in the community exceed 15% and student absences are at least 10%. Currently, the positivity rate in Polk County is 12.1%. Student absences prior to our current waiver were over 15% for students participating in the hybrid model for in-person instruction.

According to the WHO, states should consider reopening only when their rate of positivity in testing is at or below 5% for at least 14 days. The World Health Organization has advised governments that the rate of positivity in testing should remain at 5% or lower for at least 14 days prior to reopening.

Office of the Superintendent

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<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/testing/testing-positivity>. CDC Director Robert Redfield indicated that in areas where there are COVID-19 “hot spots,” which he defined as areas where more than 5% of COVID-19 tests are positive, “remote and distance learning may need to be adopted for some amount of time.”

https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/cdc-director-concedes-schools-in-hot-spots-face-tougher-call-on-reopening/2020/07/24/273ee068-cdd8-11ea-b0e3-d55bda07d66a_story.html.

Iowa’s and Polk County’s 14-day average positivity rate has been decreasing, but is expected to climb back up once the effects of holiday activity registers in the testing data. *See* <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/testing/testing-positivity>. The Iowa Department of Public Health is currently reporting 45,896 positive cases in Polk County, and 275,473 positive cases in Iowa as a whole. *See*

<https://coronavirus.iowa.gov/pages/case-counts>.

Additionally, the per 100,000 case rate continues to exceed 200 cases over seven days. Polk County is anticipating continuing growth in COVID-19 case rates for the next two weeks as a result of the recent Christmas and upcoming New Year’s holiday which will further exacerbate already existing infection and staff and student absenteeism rates. Of further concern is the state of the healthcare system in Polk County and the rapid increase in hospitalizations and ICU patients since Christmas.

Our District serves 32,454 students and employs approximately 5,141 employees. Approximately 31.5% of the District’s total staff have a health condition that puts them at a higher risk of a severe, potentially fatal, case of COVID-19. Thirty-four percent of our staff are over age 50, and 10.1% are over age 60. Per the CDC, their age alone, even without any underlying health conditions, puts these employees at a higher risk of a severe, potentially fatal, case of COVID-19. In addition, many District employees have one or more family members with whom they reside who fall into a high-risk category based on health condition or age.

Of the more than 32,000 students that we serve, 63.2% are students of color. Age-adjusted hospitalization rates related to COVID-19 are highest among non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native and non-Hispanic black persons, followed by Hispanic or Latino persons.

- Non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native persons have a hospitalization rate approximately **5 times** that of non-Hispanic white persons,
- Non-Hispanic black persons have a hospitalization rate approximately **5 times** that of non-Hispanic white persons,
- Hispanic or Latino persons have a hospitalization rate approximately **4 times** that of non-Hispanic white persons.

See <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32562416/> and <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>.

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Of the more than 32,000 students that we serve, 76.8% qualify for free/reduced price meals. Individuals from homes of poverty are at more risk of serious illness if infected with COVID-19. Additionally, lack of health insurance and poor access to healthcare services could pose challenges to people seeking treatment for COVID-19, which could disproportionately affect non-elderly adults with low incomes and people in communities of color. See <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/low-income-and-communities-of-color-at-higher-risk-of-serious-illness-if-infected-with-coronavirus/>

The Board of Directors of the Des Moines Independent Community School District places a strong emphasis on equity and strives to carry out its duties through a lens of equity; ensuring that each decision does not have a disproportionate impact on any part of the community it serves.

DMPS concludes Winter break on Sunday, January 3, so this waiver would be in effect from January 4 through January 8, with in-person instruction resuming on Monday, January 11.

We are requesting the Department's approval of our plan as an effort to work collaboratively and flexibly to achieve a result that centers the health and safety of our District's students and employees as well as student access to high-quality instruction.

Please let us know if you have any questions. We would appreciate the Department's prompt response to this request, as well as a statement in the Department's response of whether the response constitutes a final agency action.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas M. Ahart". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "A".

Dr. Thomas M. Ahart, Superintendent
Des Moines Independent Community School District

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