

Houston Academy Update (Back to School)

Dear HA Family:

Over the past two weeks, I have received community feedback on [our plan](#) to return to school. We truly appreciate everyone's input and analysis. Of course, I have received a range of opinions on the matter, but let me assure you that we are neither using the mainstream media, nor social media to help guide our decisions. Rather, we have been in communication with pediatricians, the Alabama Department of Public Health, hospital administrators, and doctors in the local communities. In short, we have been assured by medical professionals that our plan is a strong one. In fact, other school systems have asked to copy our plan in its entirety.

We firmly believe, despite the number of Covid -19 cases in Dothan, that we can safely reopen school. Understand that due to our small size, the nature of our student population, and our ability to make flexible and site-based decisions, we are not facing the same dangers and difficulties with which public schools are faced. Public schools have determined, for example, that given their special needs students, they cannot require students or faculty to wear masks.

Based on the research at our disposal and feedback from our doctors and health officials, we believe wearing masks is the key. For example, a recent study brought to our attention showed that, when doctors were treating Covid patients, and both the patient and the doctor wore masks, the rate of transmission was less than 1%. Other studies have shown anywhere from 1% to less than 3% transmission rates when one party tests positive for Covid-19. Remember, too, that the masks (unless they are N-95s) do not really protect the wearer; the potentially infected person wears the mask to protect others from him. Remember, too, that [according to the American Academy of Pediatrics](#) "contact" with someone is defined as being maskless, for 15 minutes or more, within three feet of each other. Nonetheless, when combined with our daily disinfecting regimen, temperature checks, and our social distancing protocols, we feel very strongly that the risk to our student body is minimal.

I have had some parents express reservations about our requirement that students wear masks. Truthfully, there has been a lot of confusion and misinformation over the [OSHA guidelines relative to masks](#). The warnings widely distributed on social media about decreased oxygen levels applies to N-95s, not cloth masks. There is no research

to suggest that the non-N-95 masks pose any risk to our students or teachers. However, if students have medical issues with wearing masks, we are willing to allow face shields.

Now, we do understand that we have students, parents, and grandparents with compromised immune systems. For those families, we ARE offering distance learning. Our plan includes synchronous learning where students can attend all classes during the day via zoom, along with the rest of their classmates. However, families that chose that option will have to sign a [“Synchronous Learning Agreement”](#) in which they agree to some protocols that will help make the distance learning experience successful. This document is attached to this email and is due by **Monday, August 10th**. Families should also realize that not all graded opportunities will be the same for students who choose to learn remotely. Additionally, we will require them to come to campus when classes are not in session to test, in person, in an isolated location. The other facet of this learning contract that may factor into some families’ decision on whether to engage in distance learning is that students who chose to learn remotely will not be eligible for any extracurricular activities and will be removed from classes which require in-person attendance (Robotics, for example). We feel very strongly that if a family believes that coming to school for class is too great of a health risk, that same logic should apply to extracurriculars. Furthermore, while we believe that most of our students who stay home during the day will remain isolated and free of the virus, based on what we are seeing and hearing around Dothan, many of our students are not masking and practicing social distance during the day. In fact, there is [recent research](#) coming out of Cornell University (albeit applying to a college situation) that students will actually be less likely to contract the virus under controlled, school conditions than if they are learning from home. We certainly don’t want a situation where a student who is choosing the distance learning option brings Covid-19 to his or her teammates.

Finally, let me emphasize what I have said previously: This situation is unprecedented and our response to changing conditions will be fluid and rapid. There have been a great number of questions asked of us by people in the community to which we just don’t have an answer. Likewise, we have no control of what the government might mandate. Our public health experts believe that we will be able to determine the effectiveness of our state-wide mask mandate in the next couple weeks. As you are all aware, however, it is entirely possible that things will get worse in Alabama before they get better.

We will be sending out the rest of our protocols very soon, but rest assured that our decision-making considers our children’s very real need to return to school in

conjunction with measures to ensure the safety of our community. Please feel free to continue to reach out with any questions or concerns.

Dr. Scott D. Phillipps
Headmaster
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