



February 25, 2021

Subject: Siena Learning Update: 2/25/21

Hello Siena families,

We are closing in on the one-year mark of COVID drastically changing the ways we live our lives, including how we teach and learn. I am extraordinarily proud of the efforts of our principals, faculty, staff, students, and families in handling this crisis.

Siena's senior leadership team, principals, Board of Directors, and I have recommitted ourselves to the belief that **students learn best in person, in community, with teachers**. As such, I have made the decision that all students will return to in-person learning on April 12, 2021, immediately following our Easter break.

Note: families may continue their current Learn From School/Learn From Home choice through April 1 (the last day of school before Easter Break). Additionally, students may opt to return prior to April 1 by making arrangements with your principal. Schools will need at least 48 hours to accommodate any changes.

We feel it is essential to share this information now, for a variety of reasons. Some will need time to process this decision and prepare for the full return to the classroom. We will benefit from these next several weeks, as the COVID cases continue to decline and the number of our staff receiving the vaccine continues to grow.

We have gathered data that supports the immediate need for our students to return, and this data tells a story. As many of you know, St. Rita Catholic School has been 100% COVID-free all year; all but five of their students learn from school. We have been able to study the success of our safety protocols, as well as analyze our student learning loss due to attendance, engagement, academic performance, and social-emotional factors at all six of our schools.

Attendance: With the exception of St. Rita, attendance is down at all of our schools. The attendance of our Learn From Home students in particular has greatly suffered. Even with repeated calls, emails, and in-person visits by principals, counselors, and secretaries, many students are not logging in or participating.

Engagement: It has been noted that there is general Zoom fatigue among our students, specifically those who are Learn From Home. Students are sleeping, turning their cameras off, leaving the virtual classroom, and missing a growing number of classes. These behaviors lead to missing assignments, concerns about academic integrity, and a drop in student grades.

Academic Performance: Student learning as a whole is suffering. The number of students whose STAR test scores fall in the "basic" and "below basic" categories has increased, specifically among our Learn From Home students. Interventions and support services are greatly diminished when students are not in the classroom, where differentiated instruction works best. Learn From Home high school students' grades dropped twice as much as their Learn From School counterparts. Additionally, our mandated state academic testing in the spring will require all students to be in school.





Social-emotional health: Counselors and educators alike have seen a rise in student needs. During COVID, our students have been at greater risk for anxiety, depression, isolation, and suicide. These are grave concerns that we have to collectively address. Our ability to support our students in person will be much more effective.

Educators: I am unbelievably proud of our teachers for their efforts to manage in person and at-home teaching environments synchronously. It has been a monumental task for our educators. Just as our students are experiencing Zoom fatigue, our teachers are exhausted by the demands this year has brought, often with diminished academic return for their efforts. When you consider the attendance, engagement, performance, and mental health issues our staff are responding to, it is easy to understand why the vast majority support returning to in-person learning for all students.

As you know, the CDC recommends social distancing of six feet, while the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends 3-6 feet for schools. Maintaining a distance of six feet between desks will not be possible in every classroom but we have created the conditions that allow our students and staff to learn and teach safely in school. Parents have done a tremendous job of keeping students with symptoms home. Likewise, our custodial staff and teachers have done an amazing job of diligently sticking to our cleaning and safety protocols to help mitigate any risk. Masking, hand washing, and daily sanitization will continue to be enforced. These collective efforts will continue to be the keys to our success in preventing the spread of COVID within our schools.

At the beginning of the school year, we stated that it would take everyone in our Siena community working together to make learning effective and safe for all. We thank you for your continued support and prayers through this extraordinarily challenging school year. As always, please reach out to your school principal with any questions.

May God continue to watch over our entire Siena school community.

Blessings in Christ,

Brenda White

