

February 3, 2021

Dear K-12 Budget Chair and Members,

It is a great honor to have the opportunity to share with you our experience of providing instruction to students in the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas Catholic Schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas has 42 schools in northeast Kansas. Our enrollment for the 2020-21 school year is 13,091 and we have 1,015 teachers across the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas. In the fall of 2020, we provided families the option of returning to schools in person or participating in school virtually. While more students in Wyandotte County requested virtual learning, more than 80% of our students and families wanted to return to in-person learning.

While the pandemic has been a challenge for all schools, we are so proud of the heroic work of our school administrators and teachers. In August and early September (depending on the guidance of the local health department) 41 of our schools began welcoming students back into our buildings. These K-8 schools started with in person learning, with a few middle schools and high schools beginning in a hybrid model. One of our K-8 schools, St. John in Lawrence, did remain virtual for all students until November 2, 2020. By October, our high schools transitioned to primarily in-person learning. At this time approximately 95% of our students are in schools for in-person learning.

Offering in-person learning has not been an easy task. However, by collaborating with our local health departments we have been able to create plans for in-person learning to safely occur. I would like to give special recognition to the Unified Government Health Department for their support and on-site consultations to aid in planning for students to safely return to our buildings. By using the guidelines of the health departments, e.g. social distancing, wearing face masks, cohorting students, we have had no spread of COVID-19 in our school buildings. All instances of COVID-19 have been a result of activities outside of the school day or brought into the building from the community. As one health department official recently said, "Our data suggests students are safer at school than remaining quarantined at home."

When students returned to our school buildings in the fall we noticed students needed time to rebuild their academic stamina. Students struggled initially to remain successfully engaged during in-person learning. Based on our fall achievement data, some students returned to school in the fall with academic gaps, especially in the areas of reading and math. Most concerning are the mental health challenges we are seeing in our schools. All 25 of our K-8 school counselors have reported a significant increase in student anxiety. Our high school counselors have also reported this as a concern in their buildings, and we are providing additional student supports to address this.



Virtual learning has been extremely stressful for both teachers and students. Teachers report feeling overwhelmed by having to plan and manage synchronous learning for virtual students. Teachers feel like their workload has increased, managing both in person learning and virtual learning. Virtual learners have struggled with technology issues and connectivity, time management, understanding assignments and assessments. Most of our schools have asked virtual learners to return to in-person learning unless the student or their parents have a compromising condition related to COVID-19. Therefore, a majority of our students are in our school buildings. As these virtual learners transitioned back into our schools after Christmas, we noticed the same challenges mentioned above.

While we long for the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, at the present time we feel like we have a system in place to keep students and staff as safe as possible given the circumstances. We are grateful to the Unified Government Health Department for already providing immunizations to our teachers and school employees. A Wyandotte county principal reported after the first inoculation the stress level among her staff was reduced by 50%. We are eager to work with our other health department partners to have our remaining teachers and school staff immunized as soon as possible.

It would be a pleasure to provide more information regarding the specifics of what we are doing in our Catholic schools to continue learning for all our students. Please feel free send any questions you may have regarding the information provided. I appreciate your time and consideration of this important matter for Kansas students.

Respectfully,

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