



August 23, 2021

Dear GSA Parents and Guardians:

In July, I never imagined we would still be wrestling with determining the proper protocols to start the year, but the spread of the Delta variant to Hancock County necessitates careful thought. What follows are GSA's Covid-19 related protocols with which we will begin the year. They are the result of discussions and consultation among senior leadership at GSA, other Maine independent school heads, our health care professionals, and are based on CDC recommendations for schools and required protocols from the Maine DOE. These GSA protocols have been approved by the Board of Trustees. We were not able to come out with these sooner, because we were waiting on guidance from the Maine Department of Education. That guidance continues to develop, but here is where we are right now.

I would remind all of us that as a school *our mission is education*. The necessary but very disruptive protocols we had to follow last year really challenged our ability to deliver on our mission and undermined students' experience of school and their growth and well-being. We must have requirements and protocols that maximize good and positive educational experiences for all our students while making the campus as healthy and safe as possible. That has been our goal in determining these protocols.

### **Overview of 2021-2022 protocols**

(See further down for all the details and rationales, especially on masking.)

### **We will begin school requiring the following:**

- Everyone on campus, whether vaccinated or not, will be required to wear masks indoors. This will allow us to have everyone on campus every day and for classes to be conducted normally, and will reduce the number of people who must quarantine if we have a case on campus.
- We will conduct as much of school outdoors as possible, where people do not need to wear masks.
- Only unvaccinated people who are "close contacts" will need to quarantine for 10 days (regardless of whether they have symptoms).
- Vaccines are not required, but are, of course, strongly recommended as a way to protect students and eliminate the need to miss school if the student has no symptoms.
- Lunch and break protocols have changed somewhat (see below).

- We will not be using MyMedBot or having separate school entrances.
- Cleaning protocols will return to pre-pandemic routines, but hand cleaning will continue to be encouraged.
- We will have normal athletic seasons and schedules, with a few modifications.
- Water fountains will be off, but water bottles can be refilled.
- All-school assemblies will resume.
- All of the above protocols are subject to change as conditions change.

### **In making our decisions we took into account the following:**

- The 2021-22 updated guidelines from the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) mostly focus on *contact tracing* and *quarantining*. You can read the latest *Standard Operating Procedures* (SOP) document [here](#). **Briefly:** In schools that require universal indoor masking, unvaccinated students will need to quarantine if they were within 3 feet of an infected person for more than 15 minutes over 24 hours or were touching them. Fully vaccinated students, on the other hand, will not need to miss school at all, if they have no symptoms! (There are some exceptions to this for bus travel, indoor eating, and some school activities. These will be handled on a case-by-case basis. See page 5, #4, and the following paragraph, of the MDOE SOP document.)
- As of this writing, the Maine CDC classifies the community transmission rate in Hancock County as "substantial" and strongly recommends masks for everyone while indoors. That classification can change daily, although it has been "substantial" for about two weeks. This means that the risk of our students being exposed to someone infected is significant.
- The MDOE recommends masking for *everyone* indoors while at school, whether vaccinated or not. They have left it up to individual districts and schools whether to follow this recommendation (schools in our area are making different decisions), but have offered few criteria for making determinations.
- The Maine CDC, following the US CDC, is recommending that all teachers, students, and staff wear masks upon returning to the classroom this fall, regardless of vaccination status.
- The Maine DOE is requiring masks on all school transportation, irrespective of what is required in school buildings.

### **Exposure and Quarantining**

Nothing disrupted school last year more than 10-day quarantines. These disruptions obviously affected the students who were forced to quarantine, but they also affected teachers and staff (and families!) who had to cope with the disruption. Last year, we were able to offer "remote" learning options for quarantining students and staff, but this year we will not be doing that. In that respect, quarantining could pose an even greater hardship on the people involved. We must do everything we can to reduce the incidence of quarantines.

As noted above, following the MDOE, *fully vaccinated* students who are identified as "close contacts" of an infected person will NOT be required to quarantine. However, *unvaccinated* students who are close contacts will still need to quarantine for 10 days. By default, a "close contact" is someone who has been within 6 feet of an infected person (for at least 15 minutes over 24 hours, or has touched the infected person). **However—and this is crucial—the MDOE makes this exception: in schools that require universal indoor masking, "close contact" will be defined as 3 ft instead of 6 ft.** In that case, the only students who would need to quarantine are unvaccinated students who were within 3 ft of an infected person for more than 15 minutes over 24 hours, or physically touching. This means that with universal indoor masking we can conduct school nearly normally, and still will reduce the number of students who must quarantine if we have a case on campus.

\*Note, there may still be cases when contact tracing and quarantining for unvaccinated people will be required, even if outdoors. This will be handled on a case-by-case basis.

## **Masks**

We had hoped to begin the year without a mask requirement, but the spread of Covid-19 and the contagious Delta variant in Hancock County, guidance from the CDC, the Maine CDC, and the Maine Department of Education, and the significant number of students still unvaccinated, persuades us to require "universal indoor masks," because of the implications for required quarantines. This means that everyone, whether vaccinated or unvaccinated, must wear a mask at school while indoors.

**Requiring universal indoor masking reduces the distance that unvaccinated students must keep while indoors to avoid being quarantined in the event of an exposure.** This allows us to have everyone on campus, every day, and resume normal classroom activities.

The more fully vaccinated our students and staff are, the closer we will get to being able to lift the universal indoor masking requirement. Note that masks are not required for anyone while outdoors. For that reason, we will be setting up all our tents again so that we can conduct as many classes and activities as possible outdoors.

## **Vaccinations**

As mentioned in an earlier email, the Maine independent school heads agreed last school year that we would follow the vaccination guidelines of the MDOE. At this time, MDOE is not requiring the Covid-19 vaccine for students. Based on self-reports and the clinic we held last spring, we know that over half of the GSA community has been vaccinated, including nearly every adult.

Please keep in mind that a vaccinated campus is the single best way to reduce or avoid the disruptions—especially quarantines—that we dealt with last year.

## **Physical distancing**

As long as we are universally masked indoors, the much smaller 3-foot "close contact" means that most classroom activities should go forward without a problem, and that passing in the hallways is also safe.

## **Lunch and Break**

I am happy to say lunch will be much more normal this year. We are making just two changes:

- Instead of one lunch period for everyone, we will have two, shortening the lunch lines and making things a bit less hectic and smoother.
- As long as indoor masking is required, everyone must eat outdoors.

Note: Eating outdoors (without masks) means we do not need to worry about contact tracing and possible quarantines.

- We will have multiple areas for eating setup outdoors.
- If the time comes that indoor masking is not required, students will be able to eat indoors. In that event, they will only be allowed to eat in the cafeteria (or with an adult who is having a meeting with them). No more eating in hallways.
- We will serve food at break in the cafeteria.
- Students may go to M&H during break and lunch. They need to follow whatever protocols are in place there.
  
- We will not be serving breakfasts.

## **Prescreening to come to school**

We will no longer require prescreening using the MedBot app before coming to school. On our website, [here](#), is the prescreening tool to use with your child. If you have questions, please contact Nikki Jaffray, our school nurse. This also means we will no longer have separate entrances for each grade.

## **Daily cleaning protocols and hand sanitizing**

Given the reduced concern about Covid-19 transmission on surfaces, we will return to our pre-pandemic cleaning and disinfecting routines. That means,

- No cleaning desks between classes, or objects and articles within classrooms.
- No extra disinfecting multiple times each day.
- We will continue to have many places for students to sanitize their hands

## **Athletics**

We will have normal athletic seasons and schedules. Outdoor sports do not need masks. Indoor sports will follow whatever we are doing for school in general. Therefore, to begin, masks will be required for indoor athletes at GSA. Spectators will be allowed at contests; they must follow whatever indoor mask mandates are in place at the school where the contest is being held.

## **Water fountains**

We will continue with these turned off, except for water bottles.

## **Assemblies**

With masking in place, we can again hold assemblies in the gymnasium. We will use both sets of bleachers, so students can be spaced out. Assemblies will be held on Mondays in our new schedule.

**We will have a meeting for families Sunday, August 29, at 6:30, outdoors under a tent, so people may ask questions. More details to come.**

All best wishes,

Tim Seeley