

September 30, 2021

Dear BPS Families,

I hope that the school year is off to a strong start. I've been able to greet many students and teachers during the first two weeks of the new school year and have been so happy to see the joy and hear the laughter as students are reconnecting with each other and school staff.

I am writing with a few important updates.

Student COVID-19 Testing:

We are grateful that the State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is supporting free student COVID-19 testing again this year. We know that this is an important part of keeping our students and staff safe.

There have been some challenges getting testing off the ground. My team and I have spoken to the State and their chosen vendor, CIC Health, several times to problem solve in real time, but we recognize that some families are frustrated and there is more work CIC must do to ensure testing runs smoothly.

The State and CIC Health have informed us that they are significantly behind on staffing. They told us this week that they recently hired more staff and will be onboarding them over the next week. It was also decided that we will no longer be using double swab testing. Instead, CIC Health will use one-swab pool testing and then, if a pool is positive, CIC Health will send a team to administer rapid PCR tests to determine who in the pool is positive. The advantage of doing a double swab (*one swab for pool testing results and one swab for individual results*) was to get results quicker, but what we have found is that this is taking significant time at schools and is backing up the lab. We anticipate receiving faster results by swabbing once and then conducting the rapid PCR test if a positive result is found.

We remain in communication with leadership at the State and CIC Health to better understand the extent of the impact on their testing operations in our schools. Please consider opting your child into testing if you have not done so already, you can access the permission form on the BPS website [here](#) or contact your child's schools. In the meantime, as part of our commitment to transparency, we are reporting all confirmed positive cases of students and staff on our website at [bostonpublicschools.org/coviddashboard](https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/coviddashboard).

Transportation:

I know Transportation remains a challenge for some of our families. We are working to address the national school bus driver shortage with our partners at Transdev. We have hired more than 50 additional bus drivers and continue to interview candidates. We have also moved 30 drivers who were on leave back to active work status. As of right now, if all of our bus drivers come to work, we should have more than enough drivers to cover our daily routes. Our challenges arise when drivers have unexcused or unexpected absences. We have moved our time to communicate any challenges up to between 6:00 - 6:15 a.m. and will continue to share updates with you. While I am pleased that we have made great progress and improved our on-time performance this year, surpassing the on-time arrival for each of the last five school years, I know one late bus is too many and I am committed to improvement.

Masking:

The Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) has recommended that we require masks to be worn during student drop-off and pick-up, and for any large outdoor events. I know this is a change from guidance we previously shared, but we believe this is a necessary step to take to ensure the health of our community. BPS is providing schools with signage to indicate that masks are required around school buildings.

Online Tutoring:

I am excited to announce new 24/7 access to academic support through the online tutoring company, Paper. Students can connect with tutors online to ask any question in over 200 subjects as well as get feedback on any written assignments. This online, on-demand, secure tutoring service has no time-limits or session caps for any student and will be a key part of how we work with students who are in quarantine. Access will be available in nine additional languages. Paper offers live information sessions specifically for families. If you have any questions about this service, you can register for a Parent Q&A session [here](#) or reach out at parents@paper.co and speak with a member of the Paper team directly. You will receive a message from your school on how to access this service.

As a reminder, we are posting updates at www.bostonpublicschools.org/backtoschool.

In partnership,



Dr. Brenda Cassellius
Superintendent