



## Board of Education Column

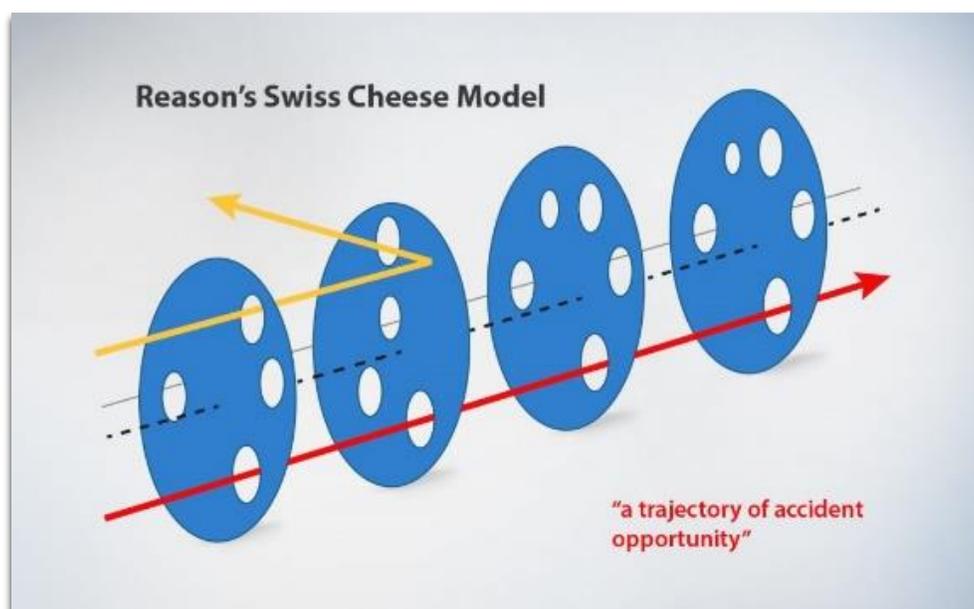
*By Dr. Tracie Newman, School Board Member*

### Returning to School Safely During COVID-19

With a new school year underway, Fargo Public Schools (FPS) is taking steps to allow teachers and staff to safely return to buildings and students to learn and thrive without raising the risk of spreading COVID-19. As a member of the Board of Education, pediatrician, and public health professional, I work diligently to assist in this process. Serving as the School Board liaison to the COVID-19 Instructional Plan Committee has allowed me to convey feelings from the Board and public to the decision-making process. It has also allowed me to share medical or public health expertise when needed. With staff and student safety at the forefront, this committee has utilized an evidence-based approach to determine optimal levels of instruction. Our goal of having children attend in-person school is optimally achieved by using a layered approach to keep students, teachers, and staff safe.

#### Layers of protection

No single public health mitigation strategy is full proof. Each one has “holes.” You can envision slices of Swiss cheese, like the model below. The hope is, if enough slices are lined up together, when one mitigation strategy allows the virus to get through, the next is there as a barrier. If our district can put enough barriers into place, we can hopefully slow down or stop the spread of SARS-CoV-2.



# Board of Education Column, cont.

The following are examples of protective layers (Swiss cheese slices):

- **Hand hygiene**
- **Disinfecting surfaces**
- **Physical distancing**
  - Goal is at least 6 feet apart to prevent viral spread
  - Research has shown spacing desks at least 3 feet apart and avoiding close contacts may have similar benefits, especially when students are masked
- **Staying home when not feeling well**
- **Avoiding large group gatherings**
  - Teachers and staff should stay 6 feet apart from other adults when possible, limit in-person meetings with other adults and avoid areas such as staff lounges
- **Avoid the three Cs:**
  - Closed spaces, crowded places, and close contact
- **Masks**
  - All children 2 years and older and adults should wear masks
  - Wear the correct mask to keep you safe
    - Avoid gators or bandanas
    - Avoid masks with valves
    - Avoid face shields alone (these may provide extra protection but are not a mask substitute)
  - Cover mouth and nose completely
  - Certain students, teachers, or staff who may be at higher risk of severe illness, as well as their families and caretakers, may need N95 respirators or other enhanced personal protective equipment
- **Screening**
  - The CDC and American Academy of Pediatrics currently do not recommend universal screening of students or staff
  - with COVID-19 can have a wide range of symptoms and these can appear 2-14 days after exposure. Given this variation in symptoms and that some people are asymptomatic, there are limitations to schools conducting symptom screening
  - Parents and caregivers are strongly encouraged to monitor their children at home for signs of illness daily
- **Testing**



# Board of Education Column, cont.

- Important for people with symptoms or known contacts to the virus
- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and American Academy of Pediatrics do not recommend universal testing of students or staff
  - Testing only shows if a person is infected at that snapshot in time
  - Universal testing may not be useful in preventing school outbreaks

Another safety precaution put into place is the COVID-19 Instructional Plan Committee, which was approved by the School Board as part of the FPS Smart Restart Plan. This committee is comprised of an array of district stakeholders. There are 18 members who meet every 2 weeks:

- District-level administration
  - Superintendent and various cabinet members
- Building-level administration
  - Three principals – one each from elementary, middle, and high school
- Teachers – three, one from each level
- Support staff
- Parents – three, one from each level
- Fargo Cass Public Health Epidemiologist
- School Board Member and physician



This Committee examines multiple pieces of information to best make decisions for our district. These include but are not limited to:

- Guidance from the North Dakota Department of Instruction
- Data from Cass County
  - Transmission rate, hospitalization rate, death rate
- CDC guidelines for reopening schools; Minnesota Model
- FPS specific data
- Staff leave data and substitute fill rate

## What we currently know

Research from around the world continues to show children 10 years and younger are much less likely to be infected with SARS-CoV-2 and less likely to get complications from the virus. There is also research to suggest younger children are not good transmitters of the virus – to each other



# Board of Education Column, cont.

or adults. While this is reassuring, the role of children in transmission remains unclear and something we will continue to carefully monitor.

## Risks of children not being in school

Schools provide much more than academics to children and adolescents. Things like socialization and emotional skills, mental health support, safety while parents are at work, regular exercise and healthy nutrition, athletics, special needs, access to the internet, and other vital services are examples. There are now many studies examining the physical and mental effects of children not being in school. These have shown:



- Increases in childhood obesity, screen time, and social isolation
- Higher rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder
- Higher rates of domestic violence and child abuse
- Food insecurity
- Loss of athletics
- Educational loss and developmental harms
  - Special education needs
  - Disproportionate effect on children who are socioeconomically vulnerable, especially children of color, and those already suffering from mental health or chronic physical health conditions
- Economic consequences when parents need to stay home to provide care
- Societal-level harms when these are families of health care workers

We know that returning to school during a pandemic may not feel normal, at least for a while. It is important for teachers, staff, and families to check in with their well-being. Carve out time to connect and for self-care to maintain mental health. Please remember, whatever form school takes, it will require everyone's support to ensure the process is healthy, safe, and equitable for students, families, teachers, and staff. Thank you for allowing me to serve on the Board of Education and to help maneuver these unprecedented and challenging times. The School Board will continue to be an integral part of ensuring safe and high-quality learning in our district. We are better together.



# *Board of Education Column, cont.*

## **Resources**

<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/index.html>

[https://www.massgeneral.org/assets/MGH/pdf/medicine/infectious-diseases/COVID-19%20School%20and%20Community%20Resource%20Library\\_July%206%202020.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1GD5pp\\_p6d3icwF7svMTlg4sq0-qkm4q26UL3hBkCv-q-MY1KFYKWI2I#page53](https://www.massgeneral.org/assets/MGH/pdf/medicine/infectious-diseases/COVID-19%20School%20and%20Community%20Resource%20Library_July%206%202020.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1GD5pp_p6d3icwF7svMTlg4sq0-qkm4q26UL3hBkCv-q-MY1KFYKWI2I#page53)

