Consensus statement from the epidemiologists and pediatricians on the BCS COVID-19 Evaluation Team

The epidemiologists and pediatricians on the Evaluation Team endorse the District’s recommendation to return to all-in instruction with specific enhanced safety requirements in place. We will continue to meet weekly to review available data and to offer additional recommendations in light of new evidence or trends in COVID-19 transmission.

All-in includes:
- Distancing of a minimum of 3’ between students at all times, and 6’ whenever possible
- Compulsory double-masking of all staff and students
- Enhanced hand-hygiene protocols (at entry and exit from the building and with each classroom transition)
- De-densified spaces for safe lunch, since masks cannot be worn while eating
- Re-configured bell schedule to reduce hallway crowding during classroom transitions
- Continued case investigation and contact tracing of every student and staff case
- Full vaccination of all staff who consent (currently 88% of those eligible have elected to be vaccinated)
- Continuation of all existing precautions for extracurricular activities (masking, 6’ spacing, practice pods, etc.)

Every week, we evaluate the available data for our district, the City of Bexley, Franklin County and the state of Ohio to understand trends in COVID-19 cases in school-age children and the larger community. We examine trends in vaccination. We also follow surveillance reports of new, more-transmissible viral variants in our region. We have studied CDC’s school guidance carefully, as well as the original research that underlies their recommendations. We have examined guidance from other policy bodies including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine; from professional associations including the American Academy of Pediatrics; and from infectious diseases experts at Brown and Harvard Universities. We have consulted our peers around the country and the world.

There are reasonable areas of scientific disagreement between these experts. This is particularly the case for the concept of physical distancing in school. The CDC has consistently recommended 6’ of distance between individuals, while the WHO and other policy organizations recommend 3’. These recommendations pre-date COVID-19 and are generally based on studies of other viruses. In order for all-in education to occur in BCS, distancing in classrooms would have to be reduced to 3’ due to classroom sizes. Our team had robust conversations about the source, quality and strength of the data guiding the distancing recommendations. Like the scientific and policy experts in the US and elsewhere, we did not always agree. Despite this, we do agree that with the additional mitigation strategies noted above, COVID-19 risk can be minimized during all-in instruction. Given the overall success of BCS’s in-school COVID-19 mitigation strategies – including during periods of time where COVID-19 rates in the community were higher than they are expected to be this spring – we believe that the mitigation strategies proposed for all-in instruction will minimize the risk of in-school spread.

Our collective recommendation for all-in instruction comes after weighing all these sources of evidence and observing the declining COVID-19 rates in Bexley, Franklin County and the state overall. We came to conclude that the preponderance of the evidence supports a careful, mitigated return to all-in instruction. The Evaluation Team will continue to monitor closely all available evidence and scientific guidelines and will amend this recommendation if needed.