



# St. Gregory the Great Academy

A Ministry of the Church of St. Gregory the Great

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## MEMORANDUM

DATE: January 8, 2021

TO: All Parents, Faculty, and Staff

FROM: Dr. Jason C. Briggs, Principal

RE: **Operational Update #24**

Happy New Year 2021! It is my firm hope that this new year brings blessings both large and small to all members of our SGGA community. Certainly, most of us were not too sad to see 2020 reach its conclusion. Still, in the midst of hurt, fear, and pain, there were also many expressions of kindness, creativity, and rediscovery. Please join me in praying for a continuation of all things good which have come our way, and for strength to deal with challenges as they present themselves. Now, for some updates:

125. **Schedule** – As we look toward next week, the trends over the past 72 hours are not moving in the right direction. Over 11,000 new cases of COVID-19 have been reported over the past two days, and the rate of transmission is above “1” again. Given this information, along with consideration of the number of students whose families have indicated the choice of remote instruction for next week, a cautious approach continues to be warranted. Therefore, our tier schedule for next week will be:

Preschool 3	Tier 1
Preschool 4	Tier 1
Kindergarten	Tier 1
Grade 1	Tier 1
Grade 2	Tier 1
Grade 3	Tier 1
Grade 4	Tier 2
Grade 5	Tier 2
Grade 6	Tier 2
Grade 7	Tier 2
Grade 8	Tier 2



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Based on the upcoming week's plan, if you wish to CHANGE your choice of remote or in-person instruction for next week or the following two weeks, please resubmit the form [HERE](#). If you are not changing the choices that you have already submitted, do not resubmit the form.

126. **Absence Policy Update** – As you know, since school has opened our policy for illness required students who present with any symptoms which are associated with COVID-19 to either remain home until symptom-free for 24 hours OR to present an alternate diagnosis explaining the COVID-19-like symptoms. In November, we also had instituted a policy of requiring a negative COVID-19 test result if a student was absent for more than three days. Please be aware that the New Jersey Department of Health has put forth the following new guideline:

In the context of an ongoing state-wide second wave, New Jersey continues to experience COVID-19 transmission among school-aged children. In children, signs/symptoms are often mild, and it may not be possible to clinically distinguish COVID-19 from other illnesses. **For this reason, the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) recommends that any child with COVID-19 compatible symptoms should not return to school until they have either received a negative viral test (molecular or antigen) for SARS-CoV-2 or they have completed an isolation period of at least 10 days since symptom onset and at least 24 hours after resolution of fever without fever-reducing medications with symptom improvement. A purely clinical alternative diagnosis is no longer acceptable.**

[Click for complete NJDOH Letter](#)

This revised directive requires us to amend our attendance policy to reflect this more stringent directive and most importantly requires that we NO LONGER ACCEPT an alternate diagnosis for COVID-19-like symptoms without a negative COVID-19 result or a 10 day quarantine.

In light of the new NJDOH guidelines, effective Monday, January 11, 2021, UNLESS documentation of an alternate reason for an absence can be provided (a dentist's note, a doctor's note indicating a non-COVID-19 condition with no key symptoms present, an obituary, etc.), any absences of more than one (1) single day will now require either a negative COVID-19 test result to return OR a 10-day quarantine. Also, single-day absences that occur because of one or more COVID-19-like symptom(s) will require either a negative COVID-19 test result OR a 10-day quarantine. Please remember that this is not the guidance of Jason Briggs, it is the guidance of the NJDOH. I happen to enjoy possessing my New Jersey principal certification, so Jason Briggs follows the guidance of the NJDOH even if/when one or more people do not agree with it. An individual school is free to impose more restrictions and/or precautions than is put forth by the NJDOH and the local DOH, but not fewer.

At this point, it is in everyone's best interest for students to not miss school unless they are ill. Obviously, appointments may occur, a day to decompress at home may be needed, or there may be a reason for a single day absence here or there. Be aware, however, that as soon as an absence extends to a second day the new protocol kicks in **unless written documentation is provided to adequately demonstrate why the absence occurred**. While I will need to see logical documentation in order to perform due diligence, addressing every possible situation in this policy is not reasonable. Thus, we will have to deal with unusual situations as they occur.

Remember that all families continue to have the option of remote instruction on a week by week basis. We will return to our previous absence policy as soon as the NJDOH rescinds this guidance.

127. **Student ID Cards** – All students are being issued student identification cards to be worn on a safety lanyard each day. The purpose of these identification cards is to assist with quickly identifying students during morning check-in, easily allowing hall monitors to identify students, and for identification in an emergency. Please make sure that the students place their identification cards in a safe place each day when they get home (or keep them in the car) and that the card is worn to school each day.

128. **STAR Assessment** – The Winter administration of the STAR Assessment will take place beginning the week of January 19, 2021. Students who are remote on their scheduled day will take the assessment remotely at the same time that their in-person class is taking each assessment. A schedule will be forthcoming next week.

129. **Thanks, but No Thanks** – It is always very nice when people try to be helpful. That said, I ask that parents refrain from giving information about our schedule to vendors, especially bus drivers. If a driver is unsure about our school schedule, please ask him or her to call the Main Office. In many cases, parents only know the schedule information of the grades that their children are in (which makes sense, of course), but forget that other grades may have different schedules that they are not aware of. I appreciate your attention to this matter.

130. **Transportation Aid-in-Lieu – Applies Only to Families Who Qualify** – If your family qualified for bus transportation according to NJ Department of Education guidelines, but your local school district decided to pay aid-in-lieu instead of providing a bus, please be aware that there is a regulation change this year. The Department of Education has authorized school districts to only pay aid-in-lieu for days that a student attended school in-person. In other words, the districts may divide the yearly maximum of \$1,000.00 by 180 to arrive at a "per day" amount, and then multiply this amount by the number of days a student was actually present in the school building. Since the aid-in-lieu is technically a reimbursement for transporting students, if the students are not being physically transported to school there is nothing to reimburse for. Most districts, but not all, are asking for an attendance report for students listing their actual number of in-person days. While SGGA has no control over this

process, I did want to make you aware of what to expect. Also, remember to submit the B7T form that the district sends to you and return it to the address indicated; without this form, you will not receive a payment.

**131. Looking forward to 2021-2022** – Believe it or not, planning is already underway for the 2021-2022 school year. Planning for the following school year always begins during the previous December, however, this year is like no other in terms of planning. When taking things week by week, it can be difficult to try to project our six months; however, the process must unfold regardless of the uncertainty. I know that thinking about next school year may seem to be an almost ridiculous request to you on my part, given that so much remains in flux. All that I can offer at this point is what I have been offering since the spring, namely open communication of how the situation is unfolding and some informed speculation of where things may go.

The most overarching aspect of this planning is to establish the organizational structure. To that end, I can tell you that I believe it most prudent to plan according to the status quo while being cautiously optimistic that the situation in terms of schools will be improved. Organizationally, the current plan is to structure classes/grade levels as they are currently structured while taking into account necessary adjustments due to increases or decreases in the number of students at each grade level. Establishing the organizational structure is the first step because this directly impacts the budget projections and tuition rates for the new school year (number of teacher salaries being the main data points.) There are many degrees of difference between where we are now and where we were prior to the pandemic in several other aspects of the school. It is certainly much too early to speculate about tents, masks, the return of clubs and teams, etc. We are not looking at simple a “this or that” situation; it is not “January 2020 or January 2021.”

From where I sit, there are simply too many variables still in flux to make a reasonable guess about what summer and autumn will bring. The vaccine is great, but it is not going to be a magic bean for schools. I see a good deal of uncertainty regarding the COVID-19 vaccine, including the timeline for approval for children (and when the trials will even begin), the length of time the vaccine is effective, state regulations surrounding the vaccine (will it be encouraged or required?), and the list goes on. Perhaps these will turn out to be non-issues by September 2021, or perhaps not. Given this uncertainty, I firmly believe that decisions that can be deferred until later months should be deferred until more data becomes available. To me, it seems prudent that decisions that need to be made now must take into account the reasonable worst-case scenario because just hoping that everything will simply “go back to normal” this summer is unwise. The bottom line is that we cannot risk having an organizational structure in place that is unable to accommodate continuing pandemic challenges in case we are faced with continuing pandemic challenges.

Shortly, reregistration materials for the 2021-2022 school year will be sent electronically. The deadline for submitting your reregistration documents and the registration fee will be February 10, 2021. It is

going to be critical that these documents are submitted on time, both for purposes of planning. There are waiting lists for some of the grades already, Trenton Catholic Academy will be closing in June, and staffing needs to be planned. In fairness to both current SGGAs families and prospective ones, it will be important to adhere to the deadlines so that all families can make decisions that are in the best interest of their families.