



St. Gregory the Great Academy

A Ministry of the Church of St. Gregory the Great

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 1, 2021

TO: All Parents, Faculty, and Staff

FROM: Dr. Jason C. Briggs, Principal

RE: **SGGA Life Insights #1**

Happy July! The first day of July represents some significant milestones. For many of us, it is the first day of a new fiscal year. For all of us, it is the first day of the second half of the calendar year. For me, it is the anniversary of my first day at SGGA (7-1-2005). The move to July is a harbinger of summer heatwaves, though this year June could eventually wind up beating July in this area. For students, returning to school is probably the last thing on their minds. At school, however, the arrival of July means that the planning process moves from preliminary to actual. The last two school years have changed all of us who are in any way connected to the field of education. Students, teachers, parents, and administrators have walked a path that would have seemed far-fetched (to say the least) on July 1, 2019. For me, the most difficult shift has been the inability to “carve in stone” so many plans, procedures, and dates as I had previously done for my entire career. Sure, there have always been the occasional curveballs that have come up, but uncertainty has become a way of life in our world since March 2020. As many know, this is way outside of my comfort zone; however, it is today’s reality.

I do not like not having answers for questions that are important to people (which goes back to that whole I-hate-uncertainty thing.) Since the pandemic began, I have attempted to offer informed predictions based on the best information that I have at a particular time. We will continue to need to adapt, possibly without as much warning as we would like. From where I sit, it makes no sense to make grand pronouncements about what will be, and what will not be, on the first of July more than two months prior to school reopening. This is unsettling to many people, and we need to acknowledge this fact. **What makes much more sense to me is to map out current thinking in particular areas, with the caveat that the pandemic remains unpredictable.** This means that, while these are current plans, anything in this update could change if conditions change. For those who are new to our school, SGGA veterans will tell you that I try to find out as much information as I can from various sources and then make decisions. Not everyone likes my decisions, nor do I ever expect people to do so. I can tell you the following: 1) I listen to opinions, even when they do



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not jive with my own, 2) I share my reasons for making decisions, 3) I will not hesitate to admit when I am wrong, and 4) I am straightforward (at times to a fault.)

In outlining the areas below I am going to reference two sources to map out my thoughts, namely our [2020-2021 protocols/procedures](#) and [New Jersey Health and Safety Guidance for 2021-2022](#) (which I refer to as “the document” moving forward.) For the sake of clarity, I will follow the format of the state document and explain how I envision its application to us.

1.1 Vaccination

Toward the end of last school year, the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine was approved for those who are age 12 and above. Quoting from Update #31 from 5/12/2021, *“As you may know, the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine has been approved for use with children ages 12-15. **This is a fact.** There are some parents who are very excited about this and have already informed me that they have made an appointment for their child to get vaccinated. **This is a fact.** There are some parents who have shared that they are very worried about having their child vaccinated for COVID-19. **This is a fact.** There are some parents who want to wait a few months before considering getting their child vaccinated. **This is a fact.** I, as the principal of your child’s school, and not a doctor (or at least not the kind that can actually help people). **This is a fact.** In my role, I encourage every parent to do what they believe is right for their child. **It is not for me to pass judgment on this matter.** We will not be giving away donuts, money, or grades to entice vaccination. If you want to have your child vaccinated, it is your personal responsibility to make this happen based on your careful consideration. If you do not want to have your child vaccinated, I sincerely hope that a decision you arrived at after careful consideration cannot be changed by a donut.”* **The bottom line is that there is no requirement for COVID-19 vaccination in the document, and SGGA will not presume to set a more stringent requirement in this area.**

1.2 Communication

The document states, *“School officials and local health departments should maintain close communication with each other to provide information and share resources on COVID-19 transmission, prevention, and control measures and to establish procedures for Local Health Department (LHD) notification and response to COVID-19 illness in school settings.”* **The bottom line is that we were in frequent contact with the Hamilton Township Health Division last school year, and we will continue to do so as prudent this year.**

1.3 Masks

This is the area in which questions abound. Perhaps I should put some Christmas lights around this item (not blue LED ones though – they hurt my eyes.) Per the document, *“Updated CDC guidance on masking in this setting is expected prior to the start of the 2021-2022 school year and will factor into the final recommendations from the State for masking this fall. This guidance will be updated following that release.”* That does not give us a whole lot of “meat” to chew on, so the next logical place to look is the state [Summer Camp Guidelines](#). Looking there, we see that there are various situations where masking is “not required” and some others where it is “encouraged,” with distinctions for vaccinated and unvaccinated children and adults. The rest of the guidelines outline procedures that very much look like those that we used at school last year. These guidelines do not use the word “required,” and therefore neither will SGGA’s protocols. I am not prepared to separate our school into “vaccinated” and “unvaccinated” for purposes of mask wearing. **The bottom line is**

that the use of face masks will be optional for students and staff. If the pandemic infection rate significantly rises and an increase in mitigation strategies is called for, we will attempt to use non-masking strategies as our first lines of defense. Unfortunately, I must reserve the right to require a return to mask wearing if advised to do so by the New Jersey Department of Health and/or the Hamilton Township Health Division.

1.4 Maintain Physical Distancing and Cohorting

This is an area in which we were quite successful last year, and we will begin the year by relying on many (but not all) of the procedures that we used for the 2020-2021 school year. The document states, *“Though physical distancing recommendations must not prevent a school from offering full-day, full-time, in-person learning to all students for the 2021-2022 school year, LEAs should consider implementing physical distancing measures as an effective COVID-19 prevention strategy to the extent they are equipped to do so while still providing regular school operations to all students and staff in-person. The LEA may consider implementing one or more of the following strategies to maximize opportunities to increase distance between students...Consider maintaining three feet of distance between students in classroom settings to the extent possible while offering full-time, in-person learning to all students...Consider structural interventions within classrooms to aid with social distancing including: Facing desks in the same direction, avoiding grouped seating arrangements...Arrange participants of early childhood programs head-to-toe during scheduled naptimes.”*

We will apply and combine these recommendations as appropriate and possible. As we open school, I envision the following protocols and procedures. Some grade levels will continue to be divided into three sections, while others will be able to return to two sections. Most (but not all) of our temporary classroom space will be used again. Some (but not all) of the ancillary classroom furniture will be returned to the classrooms. In most cases, students will travel to different classrooms instead of the teachers traveling to them. The tents will return and be used for arrival, snack, lunch, and dismissal at least for September and October. Overall, I hope that we can pull back on restricting procedures as autumn moves forward (such as no longer tenting when it gets cold.) The caveat with all of these protocols and procedures is that they may need to remain as-is or become more restrictive to match the course of the pandemic. **The bottom line is that while September 2021 will not fully resemble September 2019 in terms of protocols and procedures, it will also not fully resemble September 2020.**

NOTE: The document also states, *“Consider maintaining cohorts or groups of students with dedicated staff who remain together throughout the day, including at recess, lunchtimes, and while participating in extracurricular activities.”* While this protocol was useful to us at the height of community infections, the resulting year-long academic difficulties cannot be overlooked. Therefore, we will NOT begin the year with this in place.

1.5 Hand Hygiene and Respiratory Etiquette

Per the document, *“LEAs should teach and reinforce hand washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds If soap and water are not readily available, hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol can be used (for staff and older children who can safely use hand sanitizer)...Encourage students and staff to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue if not wearing a mask.”* **The bottom line is that this was successfully implemented for 2020-2021 and will continue for 2021-2022.**

1.6 Meals

Our protocols are well established in this area. Per the document, *“For meals offered in cafeterias or other group dining areas, where masks may not be worn, schools should consider implementing other layered prevention strategies to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19. These strategies include... Maintaining physical distancing between students and staff, if possible... Considering alternatives to use of group dining areas such as eating in classrooms or outdoors.”* **The bottom line is that we will use outdoor space as much as possible to start the year and move to classroom-based eating as weather and pandemic conditions dictate.**

1.7 Transportation

School buses that serve our school are contracted by the local boards of education, and therefore must follow the protocols established by the contracting district. **The bottom line is that masking and distancing protocols on school buses will be determined by the contracting districts, not SGGA.**

2.1 Limit Use of Shared Supplies and Equipment

Last school year, we were very diligent in this area, and supplies were provided and assigned to each student. Bookbags were not used, and it was strongly encouraged that books and papers did not go between home and school. I have found very little evidence of COVID-19 transmission via school supplies and books (if someone has come across a study in this area suggesting that this is a significant vector of infection, please send it to me!) The document states, *“Encourage hand hygiene practices between use of shared items.”* This is what we shall do. **The bottom line is that bookbags, school supplies, classroom materials, and paper books will return to regular usage with frequent hand sanitizing.**

2.2 Cleaning and Disinfection

For the 2020-2021 school year, high-touch surfaces were sprayed with approved disinfecting fluid several times per day using an electrostatic device. The guidelines from the CDC and in the document discourage the use of powerful disinfectant agents in normal circumstances in place of regular routine cleaning using quality cleaning materials. I will be meeting with our contracted cleaning company prior to the start of school to review our cleaning program and to make certain that there are no “gaps” in our cleaning. **The bottom line is that we will not be using unnecessary disinfecting agents as we will rely on regular routine cleaning unless more aggressive means are needed in a particular area.**

2.3 Improving Airflow

Indoor air flow has been a major focus for us since school reopened, this is something that we jumped on from day one. As anyone who was in the school building last year can attest to, we made good and daily use of huge exhaust fans which were installed to constantly pull in outdoor air through the classrooms. This was great in September but created some pretty frosty conditions in January and February. Our PSE&G gas bill was also triple what its usual level during the heating season (it wound up totaling around \$8,000.00/month during the coldest months.) I believe that the chill and the large PSE&G bills helped keep everyone safe, and I do not regret either. We will continue to employ the ventilation fans prudently this year. This means that they will be used as they were in 2020-2021 when school opens, however, once it gets cold we will reduce their usage. (For example, they may run for an hour or so to conduct an “air change” instead of all day.) The difference this year will be

my intention to purchase portable air purifiers for each learning space using federal EANS Grant funding. EANS stands for “Emergency Assistance to Nonpublic Schools” which is designed to help fund “reopening,” and is part of federal COVID-19 legislation. Of course, as with all public money directed to our students, there are many requirements which must be followed. (Fun fact: in several other states, nonpublic schools are able to request direct reimbursement using EANS funds to cover documented reopening costs from 2020-2021 because the federal legislation allows for this use. The great Garden State chose to reduce the scope of the federal regulations – which is permitted – to disallow this option.) While I will spare you the gory details, be aware that no actual funds hit our bank account because the purchasing is accomplished through public entities who then “loan” the materials to us, which means that the purchasing is subject to public purchasing regulations and timelines. For EANS, no orders/funds may be released by the public entities until August 20, 2021. Combine this date with the fact that every nonpublic school in the world (well, that may be a bit of hyperbole) will be ordering similar items at the same time, and you will see that we will not have the desired air purifying devices in place to start school. Thus, we will continue to use our existing exhaust methods until we can “upgrade.” **The bottom line is that we will continue to use our large-scale ventilation fans and homemade air filters until we can upgrade using EANS funding.**

3.1 Parental Screening

Keeping sick people home from school has long been important for various ailments aside from COVID-19. The fact is, however, that the importance of doing this was not given as much attention as it should have been until the pandemic occurred. It will continue to be the expectation that parents keep sick children home, just as it was before the pandemic and how it will be after the pandemic. While COVID-19 cases and transmission are in the GREEN or YELLOW categories, we will NOT conduct mass screening in the mornings but will reintroduce mass screenings if the level reaches ORANGE. We may also conduct mass health screenings at arrival if another illness, such as the flu, reaches a high level of activity. As the document states, *“Parents/caregivers should be strongly encouraged to monitor their children for signs of illness every day as they are the front line for assessing illness in their children. Students who are sick should not attend school. Schools should strictly enforce exclusion criteria for both students and staff (section 3.3 Exclusion). Schools should educate parents about the importance of monitoring symptoms and keeping children home while ill. Schools can use existing outreach systems to provide reminders to staff and families to check for symptoms before leaving for school. Schools should provide clear and accessible directions to parents/caregivers and students for reporting symptoms and reasons for absences.”* We will continue to enforce exclusion as determined by the Department of Health for the 2021-2022 school year, and our reporting mechanism for absences will remain the online form. **The bottom line is that we will only conduct mass screenings if COVID-19 levels OR LEVELS OF OTHER ILLNESSES SUCH AS THE FLU reach a high level.**

3.2 Response to Symptomatic Students and Staff

For 2020-2021, students and staff were sent home when they presented with COVID-19 compatible symptoms that occurred during the school day unless an alternative diagnosis was provided by an appropriate doctor (a podiatrist cannot diagnose asthma for our purposes.) We will continue this practice for 2021-2022. **The bottom line is that sick people will be sent home.**

3.3 Exclusion

The state Department of Health has established exclusion criteria for suspected and confirmed cases of COVID-19. These may be adjusted before the opening of school, so I will not go through all of the details here at this time. I will once again prepare flowcharts to help navigate any necessary exclusions that may occur. For fun, (yep, if this is your idea of fun) you can find the exclusion flowcharts from the 2020-2021 school year in the COVID-19 section of our website. These will be updated as necessary when school begins. Note that exclusion may occur on an individual, homeroom, cohort, unit, or grade level basis depending on the specifics of the situation. Again, there is no point in getting into the details here because the guidelines may change. **The bottom line is that COVID-19 exclusions, should they need to occur, will be implemented as guidelines dictate.**

Notes on Parts 4 and 5 of the Document

Part 4 explains the importance of contact tracing, which we were very diligent about last year. We will continue to operate in the same way in this area. Part 5 discusses COVID-19 testing and schools. For our purposes, COVID-19 testing will remain the responsibility of parents. **The bottom line is that there contact tracing will occur as needed and there will be no parental notification system regarding administering tests at school because SGGA will NOT administer any tests.**

Remote Instruction

Our school provided remote instruction during the 2020-2021 school year both when students were excluded and at the request of parents who elected to have their children attend school remotely. **There will be NO option for elective remote instruction for the 2021-2020 school year**, barring an extreme return of COVID-19 activity levels. Remote instruction WILL be offered to any student or group of students who are excluded from school for COVID-19 reasons. **The bottom line is that elective remote instruction will not be an option; however, any students or groups of students who are excluded from school for purposes of COVID-19 activity will have remote instruction.**

Congratulations on making it all the way down to Page 6 of this document! I know that the points above do not cover every potential question or possibility, but I intended to cover these major points to give you insight into the current thinking. I hesitate to add much more to what I have already written, but there are a few more quick answers that I can provide to some common questions. As such, please note:

- Access to the sacraments is at the top of the priority list. School-based and outdoor Masses made this possible for 2020-2021. My intention is to return to weekly Friday morning Masses in church for as many grade levels as possible from the outset of the new school year.
- The Extended Day Program (EDP) will operate for the 2021-2022 school year.
- Extracurricular activities will resume but will do so as faculty moderators are available. There may also be reduced capacity for some activities.
- We will resume wearing the regular uniform. Remember, summer uniform options are permitted through September.
- The regular calendar of events will be published this year, with the understanding that any event could need to be adjusted, rescheduled, or canceled if necessary. We are going to plan for all

events as normal, however, until and unless it becomes prudent to make a change.

- Visitors (that is, those who are not students or staff) will be restricted inside the buildings during the school day to begin the school year. Hopefully, we will be able to relax this policy within the first two months of the school year.

This memorandum is longer than most, and I am keenly aware that tend to be (a little bit) on the wordy side. I am hoping that my brand new “Bottom Line” feature is useful for those who have more exciting things to read. For those who are new to SGGGA, one of the main reasons my writing tends to get wordy is because I want to be completely transparent as to why plans and decisions are made. Some will like what I say, some will disagree, and some will think it is ridiculous; however, no one will be in the dark as to the reasons behind the plans and decisions. **The bottom line is that I love the children who come to our school and will continue to do my very best to treat them as if they were my own (including the two that actually are!)**

To our returning families, thank you for continuing to partner with us; for those families who are new, welcome to the **SGGA Life!**