

Fruitport Community Schools’ Response to COVID-19

by Calvin and Kate Holtrop

In accordance with the state’s “MI Safe Schools Roadmap”, Fruitport Community Schools have been following the Roadmap’s Phase 4 since they reopened on August 31. Procedures are listed in the FCS COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan for the safety of the attending children and the school staff. Fruitport schools are also working with parents and legal guardians of students, and with the Muskegon County Health Department, to keep communications and protocols up-to-date.

Here are some of the safety and cleanliness procedures that the district is doing:

Students are screened daily by their parents or legal guardians, using a screening tool provided by the Muskegon County Health Department. Staff, meanwhile, self-screen daily using a screener connected to the QR code tool within their respective school building. The screener self-populates a Google document daily and requires no updates.

In the event of a positive COVID-19 test or an immediate exposure to someone infected with the coronavirus, the schools have procedures in place to handle the situation. Staff will communicate with the building secretary through the QR code screening system and the Google document if they become sick, and will not come in to work. In case someone shows COVID-like symptoms at school, each building has a designated quarantine area. A “quarantine officer” will monitor the student(s) that are quarantined. Students will be asked about where they were and who they came into contact with during the past 48 hours. The school will contact the parents first, then the health department, in order to help trace the ill student’s close contacts, so that potentially infectious people can be isolated quickly. Staff or students showing signs of COVID-like illness must leave the building as soon as possible, without exposing others. “As of [September 22], I am not aware of any students who have been sent to the quarantine room,” said district superintendent Bob Szymoniak.

The district is not permitting any non-employee visitors into the building unless they have a significant reason to come in.

Anyone refusing to wear a mask will be removed from the building, and staff and students are required to wear masks all day unless a staff member is alone in his/her classroom. “As soon as someone walks into their classroom, they

must mask up,” said Szymoniak. For elementary students, structured and predetermined mask breaks are offered periodically throughout the day as long as they social distance.

To make social distancing easier to accomplish, unessential furniture has been removed from classrooms. “Secondary students are in a hybrid schedule so that only half the students are in the building at a time to allow for social distancing,” the superintendent explained.

Floor markers are used to encourage social distancing in areas like offices. The district is hanging signage for hand washing and other COVID-19 mitigation strategies throughout all of their buildings. They are also putting signs up at athletic facilities.

A contracted cleaning company trains the cleaning staff and utilizes all the cleaning supplies and equipment needed during the pandemic. Custodians are required to wear Personal Protective Equipment when cleaning. To make sure cleaning is done regularly, custodial staff are available throughout the school day in every building. Restrooms are to be cleaned and disinfected every four hours.

Students have been supplied the necessary materials and training to consistently sanitize desks and frequently touched areas in their classrooms.

Bus drivers have been trained to disinfect buses and equipment used to help transport students. Buses are cleaned and disinfected between runs. Face masks are required for anyone on buses, unless an individual has a documented medical intolerance. According to FCS plans, kids who refuse to wear masks will be held accountable; but so far, students have been very cooperative. Weather permitting, bus windows are to remain open for ventilation.

When asked if there may ever be a shortage of PPE for district staff and students, Szymoniak assured that “we have a large stockpile of PPE so that it is available to everyone.”

Minimizing the need to pass paperwork around the classroom is easier as more technology is made available to students. “Paper assignments are still being given,” Szymoniak said, “but much more of the work is being done electronically. In fact we have increased the number of Chromebooks in the district dramatically so that nearly every student has direct and individual access to a Chromebook.”

Meals are another important part of Fruitport students’ days. Protective measures are also in place for meal times and food preparation. “With the pandemic, we are not offering much in the way of *a la carte*,” the superintendent said, “and most meals are pre-boxed to minimize the amount of time and interaction students have when they pick up their meals when in the cafeteria.”

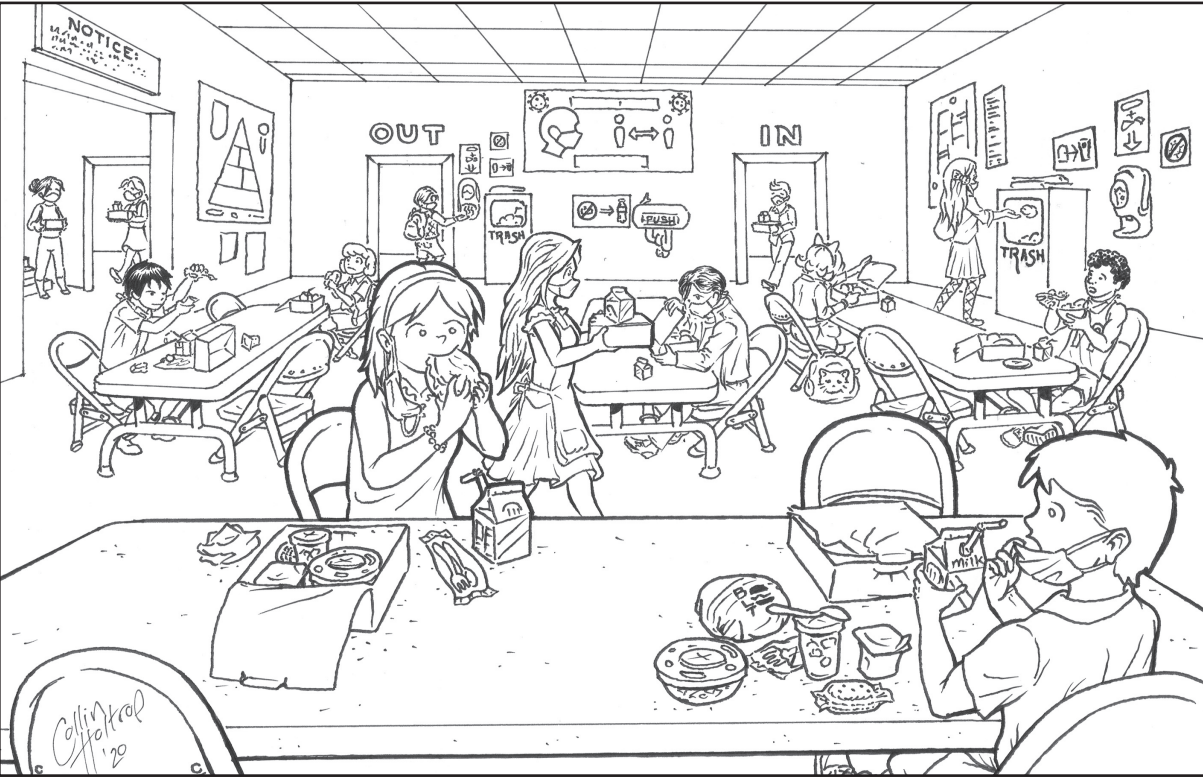
In regard to areas under construction on district property, the high school is the only building still being worked on. Areas under construction that were open to the staff and students before the pandemic are still open, and builders must follow mitigation strategies laid out by the construction manager.

Extra-curricular activities for students will still be held, but on a more limited basis. Band and choir are held in spaces where social distancing can be practiced, but there are expected to be few, if any, public performances. Sports are being held following direction from the MHSAA and the local health department.

In light of the variety in reactions to the state’s COVID-19 responses, Szymoniak addressed the question of whether or not people in Fruitport have expressed concerns over whether the district is doing a good job, since the district follows the state’s reopening plan closely. “We have not experienced any pressure to change our plans,” he said, “other than there is a growing desire on the part of some parents that secondary students go from the current hybrid schedule to face-to-face 5 days a week like elementary students. To these parents, I remind them that the hybrid schedule is to allow for social distancing with our older students, who are much more likely to spread the virus than are younger students. Changing this plan and going back to 5 days of face-to-face instruction before this pandemic is under control puts our students and staff at risk.”

Fruitport Community Schools intend to accomplish their safe reopening by following the state’s Roadmap. FCS hopes that COVID-19’s spread will be minimized, or even stopped, in schools here by their adherence to safety procedures.

“Our community should be proud of all the work that went into our reopening plan,” said Szymoniak. “We have received many compliments for how thorough our plan is and for how we are putting the safety of staff and students first.”



Fruitport Able to Feed Students for Free as USDA Extends Free Summer Meals

By Calvin and Kate Holtrop
Illustration by Collin Holtrop

“Great news!!” said FCS Superintendent Bob Szymoniak, in his September 10th letter. “The federal government has extended the summer meals program to December 31, or when the program runs out of money, whichever comes first.”

Following Phase 4 of the FCS COVID-19 Preparedness & Response Plan, the Fruitport School District determined that students would be enrolled either in the 100% virtual schooling, or in the face-to-face/hybrid option, prior to the August 31st school opening. But for elementary students, full-time face-to-face classes were available. The school district, led by the curriculum director, allowed families to make the decision on which system they wanted to enroll their children in, so

that staffing and resource allocation adjustments, including adjustments to the meal distribution plan, could be made accordingly.

Originally, under the National School Lunch Program, qualifying students enrolled full- or part-time in virtual learning were encouraged to apply for free/reduced-cost meals that would be provided by the schools. These meals consisted of pre-boxed breakfast and lunch kits that parents or guardians could pick up at the FCS Middle School on Wednesdays. Full-time virtual students were given 5 meal kits a week, while part-time virtual students were given 3. Students attending school full-time were not mentioned as qualifying for meal kit pickup.

As of August 31, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service has extended their Summer Food Service

Program, which has supplied waivers for food service providers to enable them to focus on feeding kids instead of wading through paperwork. Students no longer have to fit the original qualifications to get free or lower-cost meals.

“That means that all of our students can eat for free, whether they qualify for the free/reduced meals program or not...at least until the [summer meals] program ends,” Szymoniak said in his letter. “This program will include both virtual and hybrid students as well. And, of course, students attending school do not have to do anything to qualify for this program...they just eat for free!”

Due to the pandemic, most in-school meals are pre-boxed, just like the pick-up meals, to minimize the amount of time and interaction that students in the cafeteria have when they pick up their meals.

Szymoniak went on to explain that FCS intends to further expand their meal program. “We will also be covering meal kits for weekends, so that virtual students would pick up 7 days of meal kits, hybrid students would pick up 5 days of meal kits, and face-to-face elementary students could pick up 2 meal kits to cover the weekends.”

US Secretary of Agriculture, Sonny Perdue, reported in the USDA’s August 31 press release, “This extension of summer program authority will employ summer program sponsors to ensure meals are reaching all children – whether they are learning in the classroom or virtually – so they are fed and ready to learn, even in new and ever-changing learning environments.”

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