



St. Mary's School for the Deaf is committed to providing equitable access to exemplary educational programs that prepare deaf students to be self-directed, lifelong learners, who are productive members of society.

November 25, 2020

Dear SMSD Community,

We write to you as board members who share your deep commitment to the students of St. Mary's School for the Deaf. The purpose of this letter is to bring clarity to the complicated situation we find ourselves in as a school community and to state our goals and intentions moving forward.

**Remote-Learning Model Beginning November 12th**

The school has moved to remote instruction as a result of two factors: Covid-19 spread within our school and community; and the increased rigor and testing requirements NYS is placing on schools to remain open.

Earlier this month, we had two confirmed cases of Covid-19 among our staff members. Due to close contact, the Department of Health imposed quarantine restrictions on 29 individuals in our community. SMSD's Employee Daily Health Screening Questionnaire requires workers to attest to not having contact with suspected cases as well as confirmed. This mandate widened the number of individuals unable to attest to the Daily Health form and contributed to the swift decision to move to a remote model.

Nobody wants to be infected with Covid-19, and the individuals who tested positive in our community are no exception. There is no blame in our current predicament and this virus does not discriminate.

**What is the public health situation in our community?**

Regional COVID-19 rates are rising exponentially. When we returned to in-person instruction on September 8th, Western New York had 88 new cases per day with a positivity rate of 1.6% on a 7-day rolling average. As of November 22nd, that average is 645 new cases per day with a positivity rate of 5.1%. The rate is even higher in the Erie County focus area our school is included in (8.26% 7-day positivity rate as of November 17th).

**Covid-19 cases in Western New York**

Cases fell after the initial wave and ticked up in late summer before exploding in November





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On November 9th, Governor Cuomo identified much of Western New York, including our school, as a Yellow Zone. This designation allows schools to stay open for in-person instruction by testing 20% of staff and students. Like most schools in the region, the leadership team and health office at SMSD has been working to secure testing so that we can meet this mandate.

On November 18th, we learned that our region has met the criteria for a NYS Orange Zone designation. The requirements to reopen and stay open while in an Orange or Red Zone are even more stringent. After a mandatory remote-only period, schools can only attempt to open with mandatory testing of all staff and students.

The School is committed to bringing students back when we can meet NYS requirements and provide a high level of safety for our staff and students. A realistic return to in-person instruction, with COVID-19 testing protocols in place, will likely coincide with the region returning to a Yellow Zone or lower designation.

### **Predictions and trends moving forward**

With treasured holidays and cold weather arriving, public health officials are predicting that COVID-19 rates will continue to rise regionally and nationally. Thanksgiving is well-known as a holiday when extended families gather and often host out-of-town guests. Given our climate, most of these gatherings occur indoors, where COVID-19 is more easily spread. December and January will bring similar challenges in terms of gatherings (Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, etc.), increased travel, and indoor weather.

We do not have a crystal ball to predict the future but given what we do know about how COVID-19 spreads, the upcoming holidays are expected to bring increased rates of infection to our community.

### **Significant downside of closing schools**

The School recognizes the stress remote-only instruction places on our community. When our students are not at school, we know that they suffer educationally, socially, linguistically, and emotionally. During this health pandemic, we must balance the risks of school closure against the risks of gathering for in-person instruction.

In the spring of this year, we had to transition to remote learning and the school was able to keep all staff members on our payroll- regardless of job title but on an emergency basis. Unfortunately, we are no longer able to pay our direct-care hourly-wage employees unless they are physically working with students and/or working in the school building.

Furloughs were given to more than 50 staff members including teacher assistants, three nurses, residential support staff, and recreation therapists. These furloughs are in no way related to individual job performance. We recognize the stress this puts on families financially and emotionally- and right at the holidays. This is another significant reason we desperately want to return to in-person instruction.



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Knowing the profound effect school closure has on our students and furloughed staff, this board is disinclined to extend our campus closure except for the health and safety of our precious students and beloved staff members. We must always place health and safety first.

While we had hoped to return to in-person learning on November 30<sup>th</sup>, we now know that our remote learning will extend beyond that date. The School will continue to follow a full remote model of instruction until further notice. SMSD is unlikely to open for in-person instruction while NYS is under an Orange or Red Zone.

### **Resources are available**

During this extended remote-learning period, we understand the need for additional emotional support. The School has enrolled all employees in an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP is run by an independent company, ESI. This company can provide resources to access mental health counseling, financial planning, and other important self-care services. The EAP is confidential and the school is not privy to any user information. We've had both deaf and hearing individuals access counseling services through EAP and we encourage everyone to take a moment to see what free services are available: [www.theEAP.com/Educators-EAP](http://www.theEAP.com/Educators-EAP) 1-800-252-4555.

Sincerely,

St. Mary's School for the Deaf  
Board of Trustees

and

St. Mary's School for the Deaf  
Educational Leadership Team