

The Second Semester at Vermont Commons School, the 2020-21 School Year

Feedback Summary

In November, the school solicited input from our three essential constituent groups (faculty, students, parents/guardians) regarding the current pandemic-defined program in the first semester of the 2021 school year. Input was solicited through unique surveys, as well as live constituent group Zoom open forums. A few consistent trends emerged:

- The community believes the academic program has remained largely intact
- The community values the in-person Encounter Experiences, Core Group Wednesdays, and other in-person activities as valuable means of maintaining community
- Many parents/guardians and students are struggling with 1) the amount of individual screen time and 2) the lack of time for students to be with their classmates in the building during core class time (e.g., science, English, etc.).
- The faculty are feeling concerned with scenarios for the second semester that increase risk to their health, while recognizing a change is being called for--if possible--by significant numbers of students and parents/guardians.

In each of these trends, however, community members ranged in their responses across, the spectrum of points of view and opinions. Noteworthy is that the trends were not outstanding majorities or minorities. While a simple majority of parent/guardian respondents indicated a desire for some kind of return to the school building, an equal number of parents indicated comfort with continuing our current program. The narrative feedback shed light on this seeming contradiction: while a large number of parents/guardians hope we can return somehow for even a small amount of class time in the building, they clarified that this should only happen should safety protocols and conditions be in place and public health conditions be relatively good. Interestingly, student narrative input echoed this.

Scenario Planning

This data was compiled and reviewed during Faculty meetings in November and the first week of December and was used during Faculty and Administration scenario planning meetings that took place throughout the week of November 30th, culminating in a joining Admin-team/Board Executive Committee (the schools COVID Crisis response team) meeting on Friday, December 4th and a Faculty meeting on Tuesday, December 8th.

The Second Semester Program: Consistency and Quality with a Path Towards Returning to the Building

Unlike the first semester program, we are not making a semester-long decision (beyond our basic academic schedule), in terms of where/how the program is delivered. In the second semester, we will implement the plan detailed below (or subsequently emerging plans) according to [conditions](#)* (see below) and circumstances at the time. When the conditions are in place that make this plan manageable and workable by the school's faculty and administration, it will be implemented.

Our plan is as follows:

- The overall academic schedule for classes and Encounter Experiences implemented in the first semester will remain the same (core classes Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday morning; Encounter Ex or Core Group Gatherings outside in person on Wednesdays)
- Students will return to the school building one day a week with their core group (i.e., grade-level) classmates and a “pod” of 1 - 2 teachers and one administrator for their classes.
 - This will happen on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, or Fridays.
 - The day of the week for a Core Group pod in the building will be consistent; for example, the 9th grade Core Group pod would always come to campus on Tuesdays (*which actual day of the week is not set yet*).
 - The faculty and administrators joining that Core Group pod in the building will be consistent; for example, Jennifer and Matt would always be with the same pod on Thursdays.
 - We will have two Core Group pods in the building at a time, so on Tuesdays, it could be the 11th-Grade pod on the first floor and the 12th-grade pod on the second floor. The anchor classrooms will likely be the Commons and the Lunch Room; the pod will also be able to use other classrooms to address the need for splitting into smaller groupings (such as when Spanish and Chinese happen the same period) or spreading out individually (such as band, when students in music class must be in their own room to play).
 - The faculty and administrators will not cross over pods, nor floors, in the building.
 - To the extent possible, both teachers assigned to a pod will actually teach those students that day of the week so that they can provide a period of in-person instruction. Due to our small size and scheduling limitations, it is possible that one of the teachers may not actually have an instructional period with those students during the day.
 - During a class period taught by a teacher who is not in the pod (meaning not on campus with them), the students will be taught remotely by the teacher and supervised in the classroom by the pod’s administrator or teacher/s.
 - When the pod’s teacher/s or administrator are neither teaching nor supervising their pod’s students, they will be in their office either teaching their other, off-campus (or non-pod) classes remotely or taking care of their other work. They will remain on their pod’s floor of the building.
 - The pod’s teacher/s and administrator will supervise their students during breaks and lunch, encouraging outside time anytime weather is appropriate. They will also supervise student arrival and departure, following current Health Department and Agency of Education guidance on health screening protocols.
 - In-person attendance at school in these pods is optional: families may choose to continue to have their students attend all of their classes remotely. All on-site classes will be interactively taught and streamed via Zoom to any students at home simultaneously with those attending class in person. The term for this is Hy-flex (we didn’t invent it).

- All Health Department and Agency of Education guidelines for COVID safety protocols in place at the time will be followed while on campus, including social distancing, mask wearing, sanitation, etc.
- If someone within a pod becomes ill with COVID, or if through contact tracing the Health Department advises us so, a pod may necessarily shift on their given day from learning at school to remote learning. One pod's absence from the building will not require the other pod there to switch to remote learning; and depending on circumstances, the next day's pods may be able to be on campus without interruption.
- If two of the three faculty/administrators in a pod cannot pass the daily health screening, the pod will learn remotely that day rather than coming to school to learn in-person.
- For students to participate in on-campus learning, families and students will agree to follow COVID-preventing behavioral practices at home.
- For students to participate in on-campus learning, Parents/guardians will be required to sign a waiver holding the school harmless should their child become ill, suffer long-term effects, or die due to COVID-related illness.
- If the State of Vermont adds a COVID vaccine to its list of required vaccinations for attendance in person at schools, students will be required to provide proof of this vaccination or formally assert a religious exemption (if allowed by the state at that time) before their child can attend in-person learning in the building at Vermont Commons.

This is the first "opening of the spigot," to use current terminology. Once this goes into effect, if it is successful, and if/as conditions improve in the pandemic, subsequent steps include but are not limited to:

- Teachers on campus on their given days will begin to cross pods to do more direct instruction, if the other pod in the building on the same day consists of students they also teach that day.
- The school moves to having students on campus for core-class instruction two days/week, meaning four pods on campus each day. At this stage, the building will be segmented into four areas.

We have begun a "Frequently Asked Questions" document in which we have begun to answer anticipated questions about the details of implementing this plan. We will share that document and add to it over the next several weeks in response to your questions and as we sort through all of the logistics.

***Conditions** allowing the implementation of this plan:

- The Governor of Vermont is at the time allowing schools to have in-person learning in their buildings.
- The school's COVID-deterring HVAC upgrade is complete (scheduled completion date at this time is the first week in February)
- Certain Public Health benchmarks are met, which may include these or other criteria:

- Daily COVID cases returning to and staying at a lower level than the current late autumn surge; positivity rates remaining low
- Community transmission rates in Vermont schools remain low
- Hospitals in Chittenden County (and neighboring counties in which our Faculty and families live) are not overwhelmed: an indicator might be that ICU beds are not full
- Faculty/Administrators able to pass the daily health screening remains at at least $\frac{2}{3}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of this group
- COVID testing (*tbd, but could include waste, pool, or individual*), to the extent possible, of the Vermont Commons in-person community.
- The school's technology upgrade is sufficient to support real-time, interactive remote attendance and remote instruction simultaneously with in-person learning.
- New staffing to support daytime building cleaning and sanitization
- Additional Faculty Inservice and Professional Development time to develop and manage capacity for teaching in Hy-flex pedagogy
- Some conditions not listed here may emerge and necessarily guide our decision making, depending on unforeseeable developments during the pandemic.