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It's been 185 days since students were in our schools - pre COVID-19 - and this week we were finally able to greet our students back into our buildings and online through distance learning as we welcome a new school year. Back-to-school time brings a certain energy and excitement like no other. After visiting all of our schools during the opening days, I know this holds true especially now given the pandemic world we are all experiencing.

Going back to school means fresh starts, friends and caring staff, and this year - perhaps more than any other time - it means providing a sense of routine and stability during a time when everything feels so unpredictable.

School is back in session for all PLSAS students. Some students are Hybrid learning - a combination of distance learning at home and in-person learning at school with strict social distancing and capacity limits. Some students are participating in our Distance Learning Academy where they learn entirely from home. All students are receiving a high-quality education and reconnecting with adults who care deeply for them and are committed to providing students with the support they need to succeed academically, socially and emotionally.

I am so proud of the monumental effort of staff members and parents to open up the 2020-21 school year. Our staff members have been planning for months. They have worked through construction projects, staffing changes, a global pandemic, constantly changing guidance from the state, and have consistently leaned in and stepped up to every challenge in order to serve and welcome students back to school.

Getting ready for the first day of school in 2020 has not been easy. Implementing changes in response to COVID-19 means we are all learners and we are all doing our best to get it right for the sake of our community's children.

In the last six months, we have completely changed the way we deliver instruction, the way we connect with students and the way we think about school safety. At the same time, new circumstances are changing weekly or even daily at the state and federal levels, all of which affect our school planning. I know this has brought anxiety and frustration for many people who are looking for the certainty of a new normal.

We have carefully planned for the school year and we are ready. We know the school year will not be perfect, but one thing remains clear: we are focused on providing the safest and best learning experience possible for our students, within the realities and rules of a pandemic.

Please know that every decision we make is made first and foremost with student and staff safety in mind. It is likely that we will switch between different learning models throughout the year, but we will do so only when we have first examined safety measures, including studying COVID-19 case rate data in our county.

In addition to the case rate data, we must ensure we can safely and logistically implement a new learning model including examining our building and classroom capacities, enrollment levels, classroom sections, staff accommodation requests and requirements, filled and outstanding staff positions, staff who may be in quarantine, staff training, transportation and bus driver staffing, and providing school meals. All of these areas must be examined to ensure we can implement safety requirements and serve all students in-person and online.

In this world of extensive planning and serious decision making, it felt so good to see students this week - in school and virtually. The smiles from students and staff brought us all back to our purpose at PLSAS of educating all learners to reach their full potential as contributing and productive members of our ever-changing global community.

I am so proud to be a part of this school district and so grateful to serve alongside over 1200 employees who have most likely worked longer hours than ever before under incredible stress at an unbelievable pace. Every one of our employees is a true hero to our students, families and community.

I want to thank our parents and families who have had to manage so much on their end and have provided us support and grace as we worked through and planned for the best ways possible to educate students as we maintain health and safety requirements during a pandemic.

We opened school this week because of the collaborative effort and hard work of so many people and we will continue to need support as we navigate and respond to the ever changing pandemic. Students look to the adults in their lives during challenging times and it is my hope that we work together and model kindness, love, resilience and grace. I wish you all a healthy, happy school year.