

Appendix I

8.5

To the community of Seneca Township High School:

The last two weeks of news have been a challenge to prepare our students for our 2021-22 school year at Seneca Township High School. On July 21, 2021 the Seneca Township High School District 160 Board of Education passed Board resolution 07212021 which recommended that students, staff, and visitors follow CDC, IDPH, and ISBE guidelines in regards to mask wearing in the district. Please know that we understand the strong positions and feelings on all sides of masking requirements. One of the tenants of our District Mission of *The Seneca Way* is respect. At Seneca High School, The Seneca Way guides nearly everything we do, its core values are paramount to our success of educating all students and welcoming all inside our building. Our plan called for **respect** for all students, staff, and visitors who chose to wear a mask, as recommended, or not wear a mask, as not mandated at the time. On July 12th Governor Pritzker confirmed that the CDC guidelines presented on July 9th were not a mask mandate, but a recommendation for those non-vaccinated members to wear masks. Given that guidance, the Administration, using a wide array of research and in consultation with the Regional Office of Education, local health departments, the district's attorneys, and our insurer, recommended to the SHS Board of Education a return to school plan that recommended, but did NOT mandate mask wearing. The Board of Education and Administration prepared a plan based on another tenant of the Seneca Way, **support**, that recognized local control and provided families with personal choice in the matter.

Since that time, there has been much confusion amidst the evolving CDC guidelines and their concern over COVID-19 and its variants. School districts across Illinois are concerned, frustrated, and ill-prepared due to changing guidance. Determining best practice and safest operation of the educational program at Seneca Township High School has never been more challenging, due to such rapidly changing guidance. On July 27th the CDC modified its guidance in schools and again, on August 2nd the CDC affirmed its stance saying, "*Who should wear masks in schools? Everyone. IDPH and ISBE endorsed the CDC recommendation that all teachers, staff, students, and visitors to K-12 schools wear a mask while indoors, regardless of vaccination status.*" In a matter of less than 3 weeks, the CDC, which IDPH and ISBE are following, changed its position on mask wearing in schools for all individuals. Yesterday, on August 4th, Governor JB Pritzker issued an executive order mandating **ALL** P-12 schools complete masking requirements of all students, staff, and visitors inside the school building. No decision maker at Seneca Township High School wanted to be thrust into this situation, but **accountability** and duty bind us to safely operate the district according to mandates and requirements. School districts do not have an option in this matter without taking on repercussions that will directly and adversely impact our students and staff.

In May of 2021, the Seneca High School Superintendent's office signed off on a letter to the Governor and members of the General Assembly requesting that districts not be put in tough circumstances again this summer, like last summer, with late and unclear expectations. The Board of Education and Administration are proud of the plan we developed in July. The resolution and plan passed by our Board of Education allows the district administration flexibility to monitor, maintain, and even remove layers of mitigation strategies with consultation and guidance from our county health departments. However, we also **MUST** follow the advice of our legal counsel and insurance providers. Given the executive order mask mandate and the evolved guidance of the CDC, IDPH, and ISBE at this time, **the district must return to a masking mitigation, for all, inside our building.** Protecting the **safety** and well-being of our students is paramount to keeping Seneca Township High School great. Understand, the Board

of Education crafted a policy of which we were proud of and weeks of CDC, IDPH, ISBE, and now Governor reversals have clouded the waters.

Regardless of our personal feelings, we will work hard to bring to light some of the positives from this situation. Seneca Township High School was one of the few high schools across the state to never miss a day of in-person instruction last year, a feat we are quite proud of. Rest assured that this district administration and board of education will remain committed to diligently review local metrics and guidance to when appropriate, remove mitigation layers, as is presented in our plan. With the governor's mitigations and mandate on mask wearing, in the building there is much less chance of quarantining and contact tracing, resulting in less students missing in-person instruction. It is imperative that our district staff, students, and community work together in **collaboration**, recognizing the importance of our in-person instruction. We will have further guidance before the start of the school year and an update to our plan.

I am looking forward to the day where this is not our reality. The staff at Seneca High School are rock stars, their **persistence** last year is proof of such. Our community's and district's success is based upon meaningful, goal-focused cooperation, and of grace.

With tremendous Irish Pride,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dan Stecken". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Dan Stecken

Superintendent

Seneca Township High School