

Dear Cornerstone Community,

Thank you for your patience as we determine the best path forward for our community this fall. Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School will begin the 2020-21 year in a distance learning model for all children K-6, with on-site supports for some children. This decision was not made lightly: we carefully considered the [guidance](#) provided by the Minnesota Department of Education, an assessment of our own family and staff needs and wants, and what we believe is best for the children, pedagogically.

The following considerations underscored our decision-making:

1. A plan for robust distance learning is necessary this school year

Minnesota recently recorded the largest number of cases in a one week period since the start of the pandemic, and Ramsey County is trending poorly on several Covid-19 indicators. Therefore, chances are high that Governor Walz will require all Ramsey County schools to implement distance learning at some point this year. Moreover, some families have already informed Cornerstone that they are opting into distance learning regardless of the on-site model offered.

2. On-site learning cannot be done safely this fall

We firmly believe that the best option is for all children to learn in the classroom. Based on the current prevalence of Covid-19 in Ramsey County and the guidelines presented by Governor Walz, we will not be allowed to have all children on site at the start of the year. In addition, the requirements for offering a hybrid model are extraordinarily difficult to meet at this time: we cannot ensure that children and adults are six feet apart from each other, as required by the Minnesota Department of Health, nor can we ensure that cohorts do not mix throughout the day. Between siblings and staff children in different environments, specialists rotating for service, and children mingling on the bus, a confirmed Covid-19 case in one environment could mean exposure in all environments. This does not mean that a hybrid model or fully on-site scenario will not be offered this year. It does mean that Covid-19 community transmission in Ramsey County needs to be better controlled before we can consider these options.

3. Consistency is best for children and predictability is important for families.

Given the current trends in Ramsey County, it is likely that Governor Walz will require us to move to a distance learning model fairly early in the school year. Furthermore, with large numbers of children on-site, it is likely that someone will become ill, which will require Cornerstone to quarantine classrooms and transition to distance learning with little notice. By starting the year with all children in a consistent program, we prevent the likelihood of being forced into distance learning abruptly. From the beginning of the year, we can set the stage for all children to have a highly-structured experience, give families time to work, and enable children to maintain the practices they are accustomed to on-site.

4. Children who are in need of daily care or require additional support will be able to be on-site daily.

Tier 1 essential workers and children who receive certain services will be invited to participate in on-site care. Children on-site will be guided through their distance learning program by our support staff, and will receive frequent opportunities for movement and outside activity. Transportation to and from school will be available for children living in St. Paul. Meals will be provided weekly to children who are learning remotely and are eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch and to children whose families request meals. On-site care for children of [Tier 2 and Tier 3](#) essential workers will depend on capacity. A flowchart of eligibility for our on-site care program will be published in the next two weeks and school staff and administration will connect with each family to discuss their individual needs.

5. Distance learning this spring was challenging for many. We know we can and must do better.

When we began distance learning on April 6, it was with approximately eight days of preparation. During those eight days, our staff rewrote the Montessori curriculum. As parents, many of you chose Montessori because of its hands-on, individualized approach. By definition it is not a model that easily translates online. Our staff worked incredibly hard to provide your children with the best education possible, and we know that it was not always enough. Over the summer, we reviewed what worked and what didn't. Some challenges we heard from you were that children (and parents) had complex schedules to remember, that siblings were sometimes required to be online at the same time, that your children spent too much time online, and that 1:1 opportunities with guides were insufficient for academic progress. We also heard about some wonderful opportunities that distance learning presented: siblings were able to collaborate on in-depth projects together, you as parents saw the joy in your child's eyes when they grasped a new concept, children could bake, sew, build, and explore their environment in open-ended activity. Distance learning this fall will still not be perfect, and it will work better for some than for others. We are committed to meeting the challenge and improving wherever possible.

Given the above considerations, our Safe Learning Plan for this fall will include the following:

- Technology will be prepared for families prior to the school year.
- Family engagement will be built into the guides' schedules and be provided by school administration.
- Accountability will be higher than in the spring, with a stronger, more robust distance learning program that ensures children are meeting their academic and developmental goals.
- Social-emotional health supports will be built into each class' weekly schedule and 1:1 drop-in time will be available with our school social worker(s) and/or Liesl Taylor.
- We will regularly evaluate our distance learning plan and the possibilities of moving to a different scenario during the fall months. We will share the outcome of these conversations with families and solicit feedback prior to making changes.

We are still finalizing the details of our distance learning plan. Cornerstone's Safe Learning Plan will be shared with you no later than August 21, with opportunities to ask questions live via Zoom on August 27 and August 28.

We recognize the challenges that distance learning brings to each of you. We are committed to supporting your families through this school year, and to ensuring that children are learning and thriving. Please reach out to school administration and to your classroom guides at any point this fall if there are areas that are working or not working for your children, or if your needs change.

As we are all tired of hearing, these are unprecedented and unpredictable times. It is so important, now more than ever, to be gracious with one another and to be strong as a community. More information will come to you soon, including details for our Back to School Fair, Kindergarten Phase-in, and our plans for this year.

Thank you for trusting us with your children.

In partnership,
Alyssa