



May 21, 2020

Dear Families of Westminster School Students,

This year is rapidly winding down, and it has been unusual to say the least. Never in my forty-three years at Westminster School have I seen a year with so much uncertainty and disruption. One thing has given me great comfort, however, and that is the people in our community. Forty years ago in May 1980 as we prepared to graduate our first eighth grade class, we collaborated to write, "The Westminster Song." The original score hangs on the wall in my office, and we still sing the song at every graduation. *"Sometimes troubles make us weary and thoughts of quitting come, but survival is a learning thing, together we are one."* That has never been truer than this spring when parents, children, and teachers showed up day after day to learn. Surviving is in fact a learning thing, and we will all emerge stronger from this difficult time. I for one am definitely ready for next year, however, and I look forward to sharing it with you, live and in person, on campus.

Your child's enrollment contract with Westminster School is accessible in your My Backpack account. I trust you want to come back next year as much as we want you to, but I understand you have a lot of questions about what to expect. Obviously, no one can say definitively what will happen, but I want to lay out for you as honestly as I can what we will do next year. **We expect to start school on campus on August 10.** That is early, but with the uncertainties and possible interruptions we might experience during the school year, we think it is the prudent thing to do.

We have three broad goals for next year—to maintain a healthy environment, a rich academic program, and on-campus instruction. To maintain a healthy environment, we will follow the CDC and state protective guidelines. To maintain a strong academic program on-campus and off, we have laid out three Scenarios for "how we do school." Scenario One is our favorite and will be followed if there are no restrictions on schools because of Covid-19. In that case, school will operate in each division as it always has. Anticipating, however, that some restrictions may be added, we would move to Scenario Two and change "how we do school" to maintain a safe environment and a strong academic program. We would stay on-campus but shift to pods for each grade in each division to limit exposure and disruption. Scenario Three is our least favorite and requires a return to off-campus remote learning.

During the rest of this lengthy letter, I will give you as much detail as I can as to “how we do school.” Each paragraph will focus separately on Primary, Lower, and Middle Divisions, describing first Scenario Two and then Scenario Three. While I will not go into a lot of detail on our goal of maintaining a healthy environment, rest assured that we will follow the CDC and state guidelines in dealing with this virus.

Remembering that our promise is a safe learning environment, a rich academic program, and on-campus instruction, “how we do school” would have to change if we were meeting on-campus but under government restrictions. To maintain a healthy learning environment, we will break the kids and their teachers into pods. The pod size will be determined by the restrictions the state or city places on schools. We don’t know the allowable size of the pods, but whatever it is, those children and their teachers will work in their pods together all day.

In our **Primary**, if we can have group gathering sizes—pods—of between 30 and 60 children, this is how we would do school, for example, in 5-Day. Children would be split into two pods, each with two teachers and an assistant, similar to what we have now in 5-Day North and 5-Day South. The major difference is that the kids in one pod would not interact with the children in the other pod, even at recess. There would also be no Monday specials or early room, but we would do our best to provide a modified after school care program. Since our commitment to keeping kids safe requires limiting exposure for children and their teachers to others outside the pod, parents would generally not be invited into school. The school day for primary students would be from 8:15-2:45, children could enter the building at 8:00, and we would stagger entry and exit through different doors.

Working under a pod limit of 30-60 kids in our self-contained **Lower Division** classrooms, each grade would be split into two pods of half the grade with two teachers. This would be similar to our current homerooms which have about 14 children and one teacher. In our first to third grade self-contained classrooms, teachers would operate as they normally would, but instead of allowing the entire third grade to go to recess or to celebrate feasts together, these activities could only be done in separate pods with half the grade. In our departmentalized lower school grades—fourth and fifth—under a pod limit of 30-60 children, teachers would be paired and teach two subjects each to half the children. The 48 fifth graders, for example, would be divided into two pods of 24 kids and two teachers, and they would be kept separate from the other pod of fifth graders. Specials teachers would rotate through each of the lower school pods in three to six week intervals. There would be no sports and no early room although children could enter their classroom pods at 7:55. We would do our best to provide a modified after school program. The length of the school day would remain the same, 8:15-3:00, and children would enter and exit the building from different places.

Scenario Two in our more heavily departmentalized **Middle Division** could be more difficult, depending on the maximum group size. If the maximum group size is larger

than the number of students in the grade, for example, 60, then there would be much less disruption. With a maximum pod size of 30 children, however, math and science teachers would partner to teach half the grade for a few weeks while English and history teachers would teach the other half of the grade. Then the two pods would flip teachers. PE, the arts, modern language, and different electives would be added as possible while staying true to our goals of maintaining a safe environment, a strong academic curriculum, and on-campus instruction. In Scenario Two, kids could come into the middle school building at 7:45 through different doors but would have to go to and stay in their pods until classes began. Classes would end at 3:30. After school help would be available in each pod until 4:30. It is unlikely that there would be sports or other extracurricular activities like MathCounts.

As soon as restrictions are lifted, we would return to Scenario One for all grades. If, however, the virus increased and pod sizes were cut further, say to fifteen kids, then middle school would probably return to remote teaching, but primary and lower school would be able to remain on campus for a more restricted program in their pods.

If unfortunately things did not get better and schools were forced to close, the entire school would return to remote learning. Most of you who have been at Westminster know that I hate to close school. Westminster is always the last to close for inclement weather and often doesn't close at all, even when other schools do. My belief is simple. School matters for students...and it allows parents who need to work to work. But sometimes the storms are too powerful, and we close. And sometimes the virus is too dangerous, and the government shuts us down. If that happens, we will have to go to remote learning.

How will remote learning be different next year from what we've just finished this year? **Primary** has planned the most changes to its remote learning classes. The teachers will train parents early in the year on Google Classroom. The Primary program will include daily circle time, small group or individual lessons for children three times a week, Zoom meetings with parents weekly, and individualized activities for children in consultation with their parents. All the printed materials for the children will be provided by the teachers.

Remote learning for **Lower Division** children in first and second grade will include 45 minute whole group meetings twice daily and additional time for small groups of four to five kids to meet with the teacher during the day. Third grade remote learning will include two one hour sessions each day as well as small group sessions. As in Primary, all materials will be provided by the teachers for the parents to use. Fourth and fifth grade remote learning will have a morning rotation for all four classes (math, science, language arts, and social studies) and an afternoon homeroom in addition to appointments. Optional specials classes will be available for all lower school children.

Middle Division remote learning will operate similarly to this year with morning and afternoon core classes of English, history, science, Spanish, and math as well as

fine arts and other options for those who are interested. There will once again be a block period set aside for students who would like or need additional instructional support.

As I wrote at the start of the second paragraph, I want your family to return to Westminster next year and am promising you the safest and healthiest environment, richest academic program, and most on-campus instruction we can provide. Ultimately the educational decision for your children next year is up to you, but we need to know as soon as possible how many children we will have next year so that we can plan the staffing for each of the three Scenarios. For that reason, please remember to notify us in writing by June 1 if for any reason you need to cancel your enrollment. If written notification is not received by June 1, you will be obligated to pay at least 30% of the year's tuition. Please call Westminster's Director of Admission, Rebecca Skarky, if you have any questions about returning next year or its Director of Finance and Financial Aid, Debby Graham, if you have any questions concerning tuition, fees, or financial aid.

I hope your family has a healthy and enjoyable summer and very much look forward to seeing you and your children again early next August at Westminster School.

Sincerely,

Robert S. Vernon
Head of School

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