

June 10, 2020

Dear GTACS parents,

I pray this letter finds you and your families healthy and holy. I am FINALLY getting my end of the year letter out for 2020. I waited to send this letter out in an effort to provide you with our most likely scenario for the fall, based on current information. I know that you are eager to learn about our plans. Thank you for your patience, support, and understanding. Over the past three months, I have often been inspired by our students, families, and faculty and staff. However, it has been more productive than enjoyable for most, and I look forward to putting the 2019/20 school year in the rearview mirror.

I have read many scientific reports and educational articles over the past few months in an effort to make informed decisions about the fall semester. I was most influenced by the approach and mentality of Father John Jenkins, President of the University of Notre Dame.

In summary, Father Jenkins refers to the great value of science to inform decisions, but at the same time, recognizes that science alone cannot provide answers to all of the questions nor be the sole factor in decision-making. He recognizes that a top priority of the University is ensuring the health and safety of its community members, but acknowledges that if it were the only priority, the University would not re-open until a vaccine was available – depriving many young people of a great education for an unspecified period of time. He puts forth that science alone cannot completely answer all of the questions generated by the current pandemic. Our priorities – the commitment to health and safety balanced by the importance of our work in education – are in tension.

In partnership with parents, our schools are committed to providing unrivaled instruction in secular education and the glories of Jesus Christ and the Catholic faith – allowing each child to develop to their academic and spiritual potential. This is best accomplished within the unique atmosphere of our Catholic schools: face-to-face instruction delivered by Christian witnesses in the presence of other children who are seeking the Lord. To that end, you may expect the following from our schools:

- We are committed to opening our buildings with face-to-face, five day-a-week instruction for all students this fall. Because of the significant consequences for families, we do not intend to utilize a hybrid or alternating days type of instructional model.
- We will spend the entire summer preparing our buildings so that we may offer your children a healthy and safe environment in which to learn. We have engaged an outside firm in the health and safety business to design a plan for us to safely return in the fall. Their recommendations will address the school's procedural and physical requirements. The company will base their recommendations on information and best practices from health departments, the Centers for Disease Control, and other health and education sources.
- After being thrown into the deep end with the immediate need for online learning in March, we will spend time this summer and fall expanding and enhancing our knowledge and capabilities to better serve our students, families, and faculty, should the need arise.

- All extracurricular activities will be reinstated as soon as possible. Our sports teams are governed by the Michigan High School Athletic Association, and we will adhere to their guidelines to the extent possible. We will review each non-athletic extracurricular club and group to develop health and safety plans which will allow students to pursue their non-academic passions and pursuits.
- The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry. We are dedicated to this plan but will remain flexible, innovative, and nimble to best deliver on our commitments. There is a reality that many unpredictable things have occurred in the last three months, and some of those changes were out of our control. In the unfortunate event that Michigan is in a continued state of emergency this fall, we would remain under the authority of our State government.
- GTACS is committed to supporting any student, parent, or faculty and staff member who needs a specific accommodation based on their medical susceptibility to COVID-19. Please contact your building principal if you are in a position to require extra support.
- GTACS pledges to help all families who remain in positive partnership with our schools and who have found themselves experiencing financial hardships based on factors related to COVID-19. Bishop Raica and the Diocesan Finance Council have generously agreed to support our schools in an effort to meet our financial aid requirements. We plan on reenrolling every GTACS student from our 2019/20 school year who has a desire to return.

Aristotle defined courage not as simple fearlessness, but as the means between a rashness that is heedless of danger and a timidity that is paralyzed by it. To possess the virtue of courage is to be able to choose the proper balance between these extremes...to know what risks are worth taking, and why.

This understanding of courage, coupled with scientific data, a dose of common sense, and much time listening to our families, has led our schools to the aforementioned decisions. Please pray for the schools, our summer work, and God's grace in resuming a sense of safety and normalcy to your families and school this fall.

Have a healthy, holy, and grace-filled summer in the care of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Know of my prayers,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael R. Buell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and "B".

Michael R. Buell
Superintendent
Grand Traverse Area Catholic Schools