

July 30, 2020

Dear Armstrong Community Members,

I hope this letter finds you and your family and friends healthy and well. Thank you for your patience and support as we developed our scenarios and navigated our plans for the start of the 2020-2021 school year.

Based on a combination of factors, Charles Armstrong School **will start the school year fully remote**. During our Zoom meetings last week, we shared with you that although we had not made a final decision, there was a high probability that we would start the year with our At Home Learning academic program. Our thinking was based on the level of coronavirus community spread this summer in the Bay Area, coupled with our goal of preserving the health and safety of our students, faculty, staff and all of their families. Yesterday's decision by the state to add San Mateo to the COVID-19 watch list, which prohibits in-classroom learning, unfortunately only further confirms the direction we were already headed.

When we concluded the 19/20 school year and held our emotional "drive-in" graduation in June, I never expected to be announcing today's decision. At that time, our communities had some of the tightest restrictions in the nation and it certainly appeared we had not only "flattened the curve" but also decreased the infection rate so that returning in some form to campus for the beginning of school would be possible. However, that progress not only halted, but we find ourselves with higher infection rates now, weeks away from the start of school, than at any time during this pandemic. Our decision is not only the right decision for our school, it is the right decision to support our broader community as we all once again try to change the trajectory of this pandemic.

The decision to start school remotely, a truly difficult one, is just the latest in a series of complicated decisions we have faced since the beginning of this public health crisis in March. I want nothing more than to start the school year with our incredible students and dedicated faculty and staff on campus. The goal of bringing you all back, when it is safe to do so, remains.

Our outstanding team of educators have been working on our next version of At Home Learning and will present the program to you during the week of August 10th. Please note, we are rescheduling our Parent meeting from Thursday, August 6th to the following Thursday, August 13th (time to follow) so that you will have the details of our program ahead of that meeting.

We have an important year ahead of us – our goals include supporting the social and emotional needs of our students and families, focusing on high-quality learning experiences in literacy, writing, math, and other academic skills, and learning from the racial and social justice outcry this summer to make Armstrong a proactive, supportive home for Black members of our community and all people of color.

Armstrong was founded in 1968 through collaboration, effort, belief and trust. I can't think of a better foundation for our work together this year. I look forward to partnering with all of you to accomplish our goals and especially to the day when we find ourselves safely back on campus together again.

Thinking of you all,

Jessica Miller
Head of School

FAQ's

You are making this decision one day after San Mateo County was added to the watch list. Was that the primary driver of your decision?

While the addition to the watch list effectively provides us with no choice, we were already headed in the direction of starting remotely due to the overall level of community spread of COVID-19 in the SF Bay Area and the goal of preserving the health and safety of our students, faculty, staff and all of their families.

If San Mateo County goes off the watch list, how soon will you be returning to campus?

We know that consistency and routine in the classroom sets our students up for success and that our families need information so they can plan. Therefore, we will not toggle back and forth during September and October, even if San Mateo goes off the watch list for 14 consecutive days. At this point, the earliest date to make the transition from At Home Learning to our Hybrid model is Monday, November 2nd.

How will you make the decision to shift to the Hybrid model and partially return to campus?

Every school is now wrestling with this decision. While San Mateo's inclusion on the watch list will be an important consideration, it will not be the only one for Armstrong. Approximately 40% of our students and faculty live in surrounding counties – so the situation in those counties will also be a factor. In addition, we will make our own independent assessment of our ability to return safely to campus by closely monitoring the trajectory of the pandemic, discussing the situation with local health officials, conferring with our peer schools, and consulting our parents, faculty/staff and Board. We will make an informed decision about November by mid-October and continue to make informed decisions throughout the school year.

Is there a possibility of returning to campus in a broader way this school year?

We are ruling nothing out. We would be thrilled if conditions change significantly enough to contemplate a broader return to campus. Right now, our team is 100% focused on creating the best learning opportunity for our students given the current situation.

When is the first day of school?

The first day of school is still Monday August 31st and we are so looking forward to seeing all of our students. You will be receiving a communication soon which includes all of the details you need for the start of the coming school year.

What can you tell me about Home Learning?

You will hear the details on content, structure and schedule during the week August 10th both via email and through a Zoom discussion. What I can tell you now is - although the complexity involved in planning and delivering a developmentally-appropriate and instructionally-feasible academic program for our students is an immense task - our commitment to our students and families remains as strong as ever.

Are you planning on applying for the waiver we keep hearing about?

At this time, we are not planning to ask for a waiver. As stated earlier, while San Mateo's inclusion on the watch list is a factor, it was not the only consideration in concluding we should start remotely. Since we don't believe a safe return to campus is possible right now, a waiver would not be appropriate. We are not ruling out applying for a waiver at a future date.

How will we support new families?

We are committed to onboarding our new families in the same way we do every year, with thought, care, compassion and fun. We are developing plans for this year that are unique to starting school in a virtual community. For our new families, welcome and stay tuned!

When will see the plan for when we do get back to campus?

As you know, we've been planning all summer to safely return to campus – purchasing tents and hand-washing stations, procuring safety and health supplies, revising our policies and procedures, amongst other steps. We had planned to present the details of this plan ahead of an August 31st return to campus. Now that our return to campus is delayed, we will be focusing the overwhelming majority of our attention on preparing for the start of school with At Home Learning, but still plan to present our safety plan for returning to campus in September so that our entire community will know what to expect when it is safe to do so.