



20 April 2022

Kia ora tatou katoa

Parents will be aware that on our last day of school for Term 1, Wednesday 13 April, the Minister of Education, Hon. Chris Hipkins, announced that the country would move to the Orange Traffic Light setting from Thursday 14 April. We have been advised that this decision to move to Orange has been made on public health advice and reflects that our country has moved past the peak of Omicron cases and that our health system is more able to cope. The country is apparently seeing that positive Covid cases are declining, due to high levels of vaccination and some natural immunity after infection. However, Covid infection remains widespread throughout the country, including in the Waikato area. Yesterday for instance there were 641 positive cases reported in the Waikato, but, of course, we know that there are probably many more which are not being reported. There have now been more than 600 deaths. Not all of these people have died from Covid itself, but they have died with Covid.

There were two significant issues with Mr Hipkins' announcement. Firstly, the timing was appalling, as the staff headed off on a much-needed holiday break after a difficult term where staff members were repeatedly giving up non-contact periods to cover their Covid-positive colleagues and were also coping with both face-to-face and online learning. Second, the Minister left the decision on mask-wearing next term at school up to each individual Board of Trustees, 'passing the buck' rather than making a blanket decision in the best interests of everyone. At Orange, face masks are no longer *required*, however public health advice is that *wearing a mask is a key health measure that slows the spread of Covid-19 in indoor settings*. This advice has made it very difficult for us as the Board of Trustees, because legally we are charged under the National Administration Guidelines with prioritising the health and safety of our students and staff.

At our school, we have continued to receive advice from many parents when their son or daughter has become infected with Covid. We thank these parents for sharing this information with us. Up until we closed for the term last Wednesday, we were still experiencing a number of new cases every day. Over the last two weeks of Term 1 there were at least 37 further positive cases with students, including eight on just one day advised on Tuesday 12 April. In the last two-and-a-half weeks of Term 1 we also had 10 staff members who tested positive with Covid. While there is no evidence that we have widespread transmission here at school, the Board believes that this low level of transmission is primarily due to our strict rules with mask-wearing indoors, along with other preventative measures like ventilation of classrooms, spacing of student desks, the use of hand sanitiser, the regular cleaning of hard surfaces in our classrooms and the expected cough and sneeze etiquette. However, we believe that there probably continues to be quite widespread infection in our wider Morrinsville community, particularly amongst young people like our students who are now able to attend large gatherings, as at concerts, sports and cultural events, churches and, for a few of our older students, parties, bars and nightclubs! This has left the Board in a very difficult position, especially when we have no crystal ball to be able to tell us what the situation will be in two weeks' time! The Board is very aware that from the start of next term we can expect colder weather, which unfortunately means that most often classroom doors and many windows will need to be closed, which will obviously lessen our teachers' ability to ensure good ventilation. We also know that we still have many parents who are anxious about the spread of Covid to immuno-compromised people in their homes, and who have been keeping their sons and daughters at home because of this.

For these reasons, following a lengthy discussion in which we weighed the pros and cons, the Board decided at our monthly meeting held last Wednesday night that we will continue to require all of our students and staff, except the small number who have approved mask exemptions, to continue to wear masks correctly when they are in classrooms or in other school buildings for the first three weeks of Term 2.

During the first two weeks of Term 2 we will undertake an online survey of our staff and community to canvass views on whether or not the Board should continue to insist on mask-wearing at school and the Board will discuss these views at our monthly Board meeting to be held on Wednesday 18 May and review our decision on mask-wearing then.

Parents of our bus students must note that at the Orange setting, students aged 12 and above are still required to wear a face mask on school or public transport.

We are looking forward to fewer restrictions and returning to school life that is a bit closer to normal at some point next term, as the hoped-for reduction in transmission rates within our Morrinsville community and Waikato region occurs.

Ngaa mihi

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Ngaire Te Ahu', written in a cursive style.

Ms Ngaire Te Ahu
CHAIRPERSON, BOARD OF TRUSTEES