

Ms. Northey, Deputy Head of BISB who wrote the Reopening plan, went to the State with BISB's proposal and rolled out the testing program for the school. The Bulldog Inquirer interviewed Ms. Northey in May to inquire and learn about the policies the school initiates to keep students, the wider faculty, parents, and BISB community safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

How has BISB ensured the safety and protection of the faculty and students' health during the COVID-19 pandemic?

At the start of the pandemic back in March 2020, none of us could ever have anticipated that the entire world would still be dealing with the aftermath of the COVID-19 virus 16 months later. When we closed the school on Thursday, March 12, 2020, we honestly thought that it would be for a week or so, and then we would be back to normal. Little did we know! During Lockdown, Mr. Nicholas and I started working closely with the State, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Boston Public Health Commission to try to understand the ever-changing guidance that was being released. As a private school, we are not required to follow DESE guidance but are of course required to follow both Boston city, Massachusetts State, and Federal guidelines.

We very soon learned that any reopening plan that we put together would likely need to be amended, almost daily. Nevertheless, we knew that we would do all we could to reopen BISB for in-person learning as soon as we were allowed to.

We started by reviewing the non-negotiable guidance for the reopening of schools, which amongst other things, required all schools to upgrade air filters, install water coolers in each class, plus make toilets and sinks touch-free where we could. We were also required to purchase an enormous amount of PPP for staff and procure endless amounts of hand sanitizer and disinfectant.

As we moved forwards, we did all we could to educate and support staff and BISB families around the BISB reopening plan, including holding virtual town hall meetings to outline new protocols, which included physical distancing and masking, etc. We also made it very clear that whatever the State required, we would do that and more. This led us to implement extra safety precautions including creating safe cohorts/bubbles of students, a daily Health Screener, and vinyl screen dividers on desks between students.

Once people were comfortable with the safety measures in place for in-person learning, we then looked at options for families who may be more vulnerable and need to take part in a remote option. We agreed upon a blended option for students who could not attend school, where these students could stream into live classrooms. This provided almost double the workload for teachers, in an already stressful time, but everyone stepped up to ensure that all BISB students were still able to access their learning.

As the year progressed, we adapted our protocols very slightly, as and when needed. We also put in place a BISB dashboard that tracked the public health data for our community. We were

able to see that by being transparent and proactive, the community started to build trust in the protocols, and more remote learners started to come back to school.

Finally, and in order to make sure that we were doing all we could to mitigate risk, we put the school forward to be part of a pool testing program at the Broad Institute. Each week every staff member and student are tested to ensure that the school is free from COVID. Whilst taking a huge amount of time and coordination, this testing has provided members of the community with an added layer of security.

In the event of a positive test, what precautions do you and BISB take to continue the wellbeing of the school populace?

When the State released information around what was determined to be close contact, we felt like a school that, to remain open, and keep our school community as safe as possible, we needed to be more extreme than this and not take any risks.

We, therefore, agreed that, in an abundance of caution, despite the inconvenience to families, it was safer to quarantine a whole grade/cohort when a student tested positive. By being this cautious, we have managed to contain the virus at its outset, and not allow it to be transmitted to other students within the school.

How does BISB conduct its testing and how is this method effective both in terms of the speed of the testing on the day and the medical data after?

We have offered individual testing after a holiday or break, to catch any positive individuals before they return to school and avoid them having close contacts which may result in a whole cohort being quarantined.

Every week, we also offer pool testing where up to ten swabs are put into one test tube to be tested together. If the tube returns a negative result, then all ten individuals from that pool are considered negative. If the pool returns a positive result, then all ten individuals need to retest individually to identify the positive individual. Once a positive individual is identified, then the regular quarantining protocols kick in.

The results are returned to us extremely quickly by the Broad Institute and as a school, we have found it very useful to know at the start of each week that the school is clear from COVID.

Are there any methods you would suggest the school incorporate for a more efficient testing scheme?

The only thing that I believe could make the process more efficient would be to have a more efficient way of retesting the individuals from a positive pool. There are ways to do this, however, as we're part of the initial trialing of Pool testing in schools, this was not an option for us at the time.

What is the school's approach to testing when it comes to fully vaccinated people?

The school has decided to continue to test fully vaccinated people, as there is not enough data, or evidence, worldwide to show that vaccinated people aren't still capable of carrying and transmitting the virus. Currently, in the school, the majority of students are not yet vaccinated, as they are under 12 years old.

Thank you for reading this article on BISB's approach to the pandemic by the BISB Bulldog Inquirer.

We are hugely grateful to Ms. Northey for her detailed responses in this article and incredible response to the COVID-19 situation and enabling a quick and efficient recovery for the school. As BISB comes out of the pandemic stronger, updates including 'another week of 100% negative results for our Pool Tests, meaning that all 57 Pools returned a Negative Result,' show a bright path forward for BISB's future.

Further in the email released on Saturday June 5th, 2021 Ms. Northey wrote in an email to the BISB community saying due to the completely negative result that week, "As of Monday, 7 June, when outdoors for recess, or for outdoor learning, the wearing of masks for students will now be optional. Also, when outdoors, masks are optional for all fully vaccinated educators. However, please note that this is optional, and there will be people who are not comfortable with removing their masks, and this must be respected.

Students from Year 2 and below must have lanyards attached to their masks, so that they can just take them down but do not lose them or muddle them up with other students. Older students may either have lanyards or should keep their masks on their wrists whilst outside, so that they can put them straight on if needed, or when entering the buildings."

We hope BISB will continue its successful strives forward beating back the pandemic and keeping the community safe.

Thank you,
Harry Smith (Feature writer for the Bulldog Inquirer Y10)