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Students begin a socially distanced return to Newton high schools. 'It's just so good to be around people'

By **Angela Yang** Boston University journalist, Updated February 10, 2021, 2 hours ago



Newton North High School SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

When Keiran Leary walked through the doors of Newton North High School for the first time since March, he found the classroom environment “unmatchable” compared to his perch at home. For him, things began feeling normal again.

The first cohort of Newton's high schoolers returned to the school grounds Jan 28 to find desks spaced 6 feet apart and one-way arrows guiding foot traffic through the hallways.

After more than 10 months of logging into school from home, students who opted into the district's new hybrid format can now engage in side conversations with peers during class or trade jokes with a teacher while sanitizing their desks.

Leary, a senior at Newton North, said as a naturally social person, being in the school building has boosted his spirits dramatically.

"We've been locked inside our houses for so long, and it's just so good to be around people," Leary said. "When I got home, I smiled the whole night."



A total of three cohorts will rotate in person, with each group coming physically to class for two successive days at a time. This means most hybrid students should experience six days per month of in-classroom learning.

Depending on the instructor, students in the classroom either join their remote counterparts on Zoom or see the rest of the class projected onto a screen. Meanwhile, those whose teachers are working remotely can find a location on campus to log into their

online course.

Newton's high schools offer free COVID-19 testing to symptomatic, in-person learners. All other students must complete a daily self-assessment of their health before entering campus.

So far, Newton South High School senior Grace Tourtelotte said she has observed consistent adherence to mask-wearing protocols at school. Students keep their masks on in restrooms, too, she said, even though teachers wouldn't be around to catch any rule-breaking.

"I think there's a common understanding of the fact that if we don't follow the rules, we won't be in school," Tourtelotte said. "And that alternative is just not worth it to people."

Newton North senior Coral Lin said she has seen groups of students walk around in huddles of about 10 people, with masks worn improperly on their faces.

Still, those instances tend to be the exception, she said. Like Tourtelotte, Lin said her peers want a return to normal school days and seem to understand the severity of the coronavirus.

"I think everyone is just trying their best to make it be a safe environment," Lin said. "So I do appreciate a lot of the work that's being put in to make this happen."

About six to eight students typically occupy one classroom, according to Danielle Sinay, a junior at Newton North. She said she feels safe in class, but lunchtime is concerning because students can remove their masks to eat.

Those in the cafeteria must sit six feet apart at individual desks all facing the same direction, and because this allows for minimal social interaction, Sinay said, many choose to head to their cars and eat with a friend group.

But Sinay, who describes herself as easily distracted when learning from home, said she wishes Newton had sent high schoolers back to the classroom “a very long time ago.” She had hoped to return in the fall, when COVID-19 infection rates were lower in Massachusetts than they are now.

“I think it’s just incredibly funny that there was so much time before to do this where cases were relatively low before all these spikes,” she said. “Now, out of all the times, is when you can choose to go back?”

Newton Public Schools had spent the fall working out space issues, along with the number of teachers expected to return to in-person teaching, according to Julie McDonough, the district’s communications director.

“There have been a range of opinions,” McDonough said. “We had a working group on the high schools to figure out how to make it possible — we surveyed the community, we got everyone to respond.”

Newton North sophomore Audrey Pozen said she would have preferred the high schools wait until at least spring quarter to reopen.

Pozen chose to continue fully remote learning this quarter largely because of the more contagious COVID-19 variant now making its way around the world. Also factoring into her decision, she said, is that about half of her teachers have decided to keep teaching remotely.

Despite not being in the same room as some of her friends, she said her in-classroom teachers foster enjoyable interaction for both groups, whether it be through having all students join the same Zoom room or projecting the remote students onto a whiteboard.

“I personally enjoy learning in person better, so I’m a little bit sad that I’m not doing in-person learning, but I want to put my safety first,” Pozen said. “If we can get COVID under control and if we can get a lot of people vaccinated, then I’d probably feel safer

going back in.”

Also staying a remote student at Newton North is junior Theo Hofmann, who decided the risk of contracting the virus was not worth the offer of learning in a classroom for two days out of the week.

“I would not have gone back to hybrid if I was in charge of running the school,” Hofmann said. “However, I definitely do see the benefits of having it, and that some people need it and want it.”

Hofmann said he, too, enjoys the enhanced scope of communication in-person learning fosters, and wouldn't hesitate to choose the option if not for the current public health crisis. But for now, he said, there are too many factors to manage.

While he trusts his peers to exercise a “decent amount of common sense” in following safety guidelines, he said, he is also skeptical about the feasibility of keeping the pandemic at bay on any high school campus.

“The fact of the matter is, you can't be perfect,” Hofmann said. “People are going to make mistakes, and things are going to happen.”

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