Dear Parents,

Over the past weeks, we have communicated with you regularly about the evolution of our reopening plans, as we fine-tune in response to the local situation, as well as to growing scientific knowledge about COVID-19. I recognize that it can certainly seem like a deluge, but it is our intention to provide clarity and detail about all we are doing to sustain the educational program for our 1,200 Bulldogs, as well for over 200 Bulldog faculty and staff.

As we know from countless examples in colleges, universities, and schools, even one or two infected individuals, unchecked or undetected, can lead to rapid, exponential spread in a community. The testing program we have developed and continue to advance is designed to give us the ability to quickly identify a positive case, conduct contact tracing, and separate positives and potential exposures – a strategy and approach that give us the best chance of sustaining our educational program. The lack of a national plan or program has resulted in a testing landscape that is unusually dynamic and unpredictable, and our strategy has by necessity been responsive and nimble. In that vein, this message provides an update on our testing program, information about the next phase of testing, as well as directions for completing necessary paperwork.

We are nearing completion of our two rounds of testing with Mako Medical Laboratories, using the TaqPath RT-PCR test with a mid-nasal swab collection method. Mako’s efficiency and precision in both collection of and processing tests within approximately 48 hours enabled us to complete a phased reopening in the safest possible operating environment and to conduct a second round of PCR tests to check to see how our safety protocols were working. We are appreciative of Mako’s expertise and partnership, and as far as our outcomes, we are cautiously optimistic. With re-testing nearly completed in three divisions, we have had only a few isolated cases. We believe that our testing and tracing system has mitigated spread of those cases in the community.

During this time—and, in fact, throughout the summer—we have been looking for a less invasive test that provides equivalent accuracy and rapid turnaround; we also sought a test that would be affordable enough to sustain frequent testing throughout the year, so that we can strive to prevent outbreaks and community spread. More efficient testing will give us more flexibility in dealing with changing circumstances – both those that pose challenges and possible opportunities to restore suspended programs. We are now moving forward with Mirimus, a New York-based company founded by scientists at several universities, which offers COVID-19 saliva pool testing. Dr. Jonathan Zenilman, the epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins University who is working in partnership with us, reviewed this company’s credentials and track record as part of our due diligence, vetting, and selection process, and we have spoken extensively with their references. In fact, Mirimus has just recently been approved by Yale University to advance its leading-edge saliva-based test. The company’s test, SalivaClear, should allow us to monitor and detect infection in groups, or “pools,” of individuals. Pooling is a longstanding protocol which is very efficient for screening groups (like NA) with a very low incidence of infection. Pooling both saves money and conserves testing materials and resources. This test also allows for self-collection of samples; while we will start by collecting samples at school, we can envision moving to a method that allows for self-collection at home.
On Friday, October 2, we will complete our second round of testing and initiate our new saliva-based testing program, starting with Upper School students. This will be the only occasion when we re-test and conduct our new saliva test at the same time. Doing so allows us to compare results as we transition into our new saliva-based testing protocol. We are backing up our research and the guidance of our experts with side-by-side testing of the two methods as a final check to confirm that we are not sacrificing accuracy.

We would ask you to complete new paperwork by Wednesday, September 30, that provides authorization to test your child(ren); completing and signing the document(s) once will cover repeated saliva tests by Mirimus. Please log in to the Norfolk Academy website, where you will see a yellow banner with the form to complete and sign electronically. If you have more than one child enrolled, you will need to complete separate forms for each. If you would like a copy of the form, please contact Ms. Susan Gall in our business office. If you have any questions about the test or the documentation that must be completed, please contact Ms. Torie Porter, Head School Nurse, or Ms. Anita Pozin, our testing logistics coordinator.

This week, we are beginning wastewater testing on campus, which provides earlier detection of the coronavirus than individual testing; it is a method that is being adopted by an increasing number of colleges and universities and independent schools. We are working with Hazen and Sawyer, a civil engineering firm with significant experience in wastewater measurements and analysis, including leading-edge COVID-19 waste stream testing.

I am grateful for the expressions of appreciation and gratitude from so many of you. In these challenging and divisive times, there’s rarely unanimity on any topic, but let me close by sharing some unifying, unvarnished truths and heartfelt expressions with you: A prevailing spirit of care, love, and concern for every Bulldog drives and frames our decision-making. Our single, laser-focus continues to be to marshal every resource we can to sustain the educational program for our students while providing the healthiest, safest operating environment possible. These times will continue to require of us sacrifice, empathy, adult-modeling, and self-discipline. These efforts we make take on even more meaning and power when we remind ourselves what a gift our NA community is to every child and every family among us. Let’s protect and sustain this gift together.

Yours sincerely,

Dennis G. Manning
Headmaster