

Dear K-4 Merrimack Families~

As the second semester approaches, the Merrimack School District has been working to develop a new model of educational delivery even as the challenges of maintaining school in the midst of a pandemic continue. Throughout this long and deep challenge our goal has always been to return to full time instruction. However, health risks to students and staff and, more recently, staff shortages, have combined to make that goal very difficult to achieve for most school districts in our state and around the country. However, we approach the new year with a re-commitment to achieving the goal of full time instruction wherever we think we can make that happen, despite the significant challenges it will inevitably cause.

Toward that end, in grades K-4, we are working very hard to develop a plan that allows for a return to full time in school instruction for those who wish to do so. As you would expect, this effort will be challenging as we try, at the same time, to address potential impacts of this proposal on existing health and safety protocols and continue to experience the challenges, faced by all employers, of staff shortages. Still, we are committed to the effort of offering full time in school instruction to any student in grades K-4 who wishes to select that as an option for second semester, even if they have previously elected the remote option. Importantly, for those who elect the fully remote option, this also means that those students will attend school full time four days a week remotely, with an early release on Fridays for the purposes described below.

In order to do this, we need to know which of two options our K-4 community wishes to choose for second semester. Therefore, tomorrow, you will be receiving a simple survey from your child's school asking you to choose whether you wish your child to participate in full time in school instruction or to participate in full time remote instruction. Before you answer this question, there are a few things you need to know:

1. Our district cannot support three options, which means three separate and concurrent systems. Therefore, we are eliminating the hybrid option and instead asking our K-4 community if it wishes to participate in full time in school instruction or full time remote instruction.
2. Safety protocols, particularly relating to social distance in classrooms and buses will be impacted by this proposed change. This is not due to lack of effort but rather to an increase in numbers of students and staff gathering in one place and what that may mean for transmission of the virus despite safety protocols that we will continue to enforce. As with everything else we have attempted to do, in offering this option we are attempting to balance our goal to bring

students back to in school instruction while keeping an eye on their health and safety, which we value above all other things.

3. The proposed full time options asks families to understand the need for an early dismissal of students in grades K-4 every Friday at 12:45. Why?
  - a. In a typical school year, teachers meet in common planning time for the purposes of planning lessons, conferring with special educators, guidance staff and other personnel to review data about student progress, emerging needs etc. and other student centered activities. These planning times are usually accommodated by a schedule that allows for classroom teachers and others (PLT's) to meet for the purposes described above. It is all part of the typical school day and time our teachers need and use to provide for the best educational experience we can offer. Because of COVID impacts on our current and proposed schedule, particularly as relates to the availability of those teachers who are required to service both in person and remote students, we are not able to provide teachers with that vital planning time in the school day to conduct the other part of their work that is not direct instruction; the co-planning of lessons, the conferring about student progress, and planning the development and implementation of differentiated instruction based on that evaluation of student progress through consistent data analysis. Now, more than ever, students need teachers to take that time on Friday, which they otherwise would not have, to maximize the impact of their instruction on student learning.
4. The impact of the virus on students, staff and, by extension, our ability to safely operate school in this or any model is, as it has always been, unpredictable and subject to sudden change. This is unavoidable. However, our number one priority will remain, as it always has been, the health and safety of all our students and staff and, as much as is in our ability to manage, the reduction of virus transmission within our schools. Nevertheless, we remain committed to carefully and cautiously, with eyes wide open about the challenges, providing an option for our K-4 students to return to full time in school learning if they wish to do so.

The survey you will soon receive is our attempt to collect data about possible interest in this proposal from our K-4 community and will, of course, be shared next week with our school board who will provide guidance, as is their role, about the final form of our second semester instructional model.

One final note: Information concerning proposed second semester plans for students in grades 5-12 will be forthcoming early next week.

With thanks as always for this community's support of its schools and teachers during this challenging time,

Mark McLaughlin

Superintendent