

Dear Merrimack Families~

As the Merrimack School District (MSD) joins with schools across the state and around the world to consider what schools and schooling will look like after the pandemic crisis subsides, the most important question that must be asked is this: Should schools automatically return to past practices or should they evolve to better reflect the needs of students and their families?

The pandemic came like a tidal wave and swept away all the assumptions about what schools and schooling can and should do. It didn't wait for difficult questions to be analyzed or researched or field tested. It required on the spot response and daily, sometimes even hourly, reflection and refinement. One of the assumptions that the pandemic tested is that the best learning is always in person. Certainly, for most students, that is true. The socialization and routine of in school learning, and the positive relationships that come from that among students and between individual students and their teachers cannot be denied. If nothing else, the pandemic reaffirmed the importance of schools in the life of a community. However, the pandemic also taught us an equally important, but much less well publicized lesson; for some students, remote learning provided a much needed and very welcome alternative to traditional in person learning. Whether for health, social-emotional, personal or many other unique reasons, remote learning proved very successful for some of our Merrimack students. The essential question now is this: Should students for whom remote learning was successful and compatible with their needs and their parents' wishes be required to return to in school learning when the health and safety need to do so subsides?

The State of New Hampshire has been very active in recent years in promoting school choice as an option for families who wish to seek alternatives to traditional learning. In most cases, that choice has been framed as a choice between public schools and private and/or charter schools. In partnership, the Merrimack School District has always supported any family making such choices and will continue to do so. But as we strive toward continuous improvement and innovation of our programs we have begun to look ahead to find ways to provide our own Merrimack families with choice as well based on feedback we have received over the past year and our greater understanding of the various ways that students can find and sustain learning success.

In response to the pandemic, the MSD designated a veteran educator and administrator, Mr. William Morris, to coordinate remote learning for those wishing to choose that option during the pandemic. I believe we are the first district in the state to recognize the need for such coordination, given the challenges that the pandemic created for schools who opted to provide multiple options for learning. Our vision for that role, and the Remote Education Academy for Learning (REAL) that Mr. Morris now oversees, is to align the REAL program with the broader issue of choice increasingly promoted in our state.

In order to understand the demand for such choice in our district, we will soon be sending every family in the MSD a brief survey asking them to share their location preferences for schooling next year; remote learning (home) or in school learning (traditional).

Here is what we know already.

- Barring a dramatic resurgence of the coronavirus in our community/state, the MSD, like most schools locally, nationally, and internationally, will be open to full time in school learning next fall.
- Most students will choose to attend in school learning, and they will be welcomed, of course, enthusiastically.
- Some students will choose to attend school remotely. These students will be welcomed enthusiastically as well, given that there is viable and demonstrated interest in this model, as long as we have confirmed numbers sufficient to support remote learning classrooms.

The pandemic provided the opportunity for schools to demonstrate, once again, that schools can flexibly accommodate to students' various and unique needs, even in the midst of an unanticipated crisis. The MSD now has the opportunity to plan for the needs of students that have been revealed by the pandemic, and we are hard at work doing just that. Please be on the lookout for a survey coming in early May that will assess the level of interest of families in participating in remote learning in the fall so that we can better plan to serve those students who want to make that choice.

Thank you.