

Dear Merrimack Families~

I am writing this afternoon with a series of updates related to the Merrimack School District's response to the current health emergency. This first message will address the school district's response to COVID-19 in the context of breaking developments, almost by the minute. The second message, to be sent later this afternoon, will address plans for remote learning and the ways that parents/students can expect to receive work in the coming days.

As you all know, the pace with which information about the virus has been released has increased significantly over the last few days, and with it the need to respond just as quickly. In addition, the pace with which the state has shared guidance related to responses to this fast changing information has increased as well. At times, while well intentioned as all such messages are in these challenging times, state messaging has been, frequently, hard to understand and even contradictory. For example, Commissioner of Education Edelblut has been very clear with school districts concerning the expectation for educators to work in their schools during this health emergency, specifically referencing the likelihood that students requiring special services would continue to receive those services in the schools. In fact, as recently as yesterday afternoon in a teleconference with state school superintendents, this position was reaffirmed. My message to Merrimack educators yesterday, concerning expectations about on-site presence, was informed by my interpretation of those very NH DOE expectations. As has happened frequently over the last few weeks, subsequent announcements concerning the state and federal response to COVID-19 significantly changed the dynamic around our district's response relative to teachers working in their schools. Specifically, the governor's announcement, late yesterday afternoon, banning in-house dining at local bars and restaurants, followed later by the president's announcement regarding updated guidance concerning gathering in groups of ten or more, called into question the state DOE guidance and, with it, our district's response to it. To be clear, there still has been no similarly clear message from state DOE officials about teachers at the work site. However, as before, we are trying to respond in real time to a multiplicity of events while remaining, or trying to remain, consistent with guidance from health and education officials upon whom we have been relying for much of our actionable information.

In light of the governor's restaurant ban, and the president's updated order concerning large group gatherings, the Merrimack School District has updated its directives, too, in regard to educators at the work site. Today, I announced to educators in each of our schools that effective tomorrow, March 18, educators may choose either to work from home, remotely, or to work from school, according to their individual needs and preferences. To be clear, even now, there has been no ban issued by state authorities on educators working from school. However, Merrimack, like other districts, is choosing to provide these options to our educators in light of recent unfolding developments and still, in the absence of direction as clear as that given to restaurants and bars.

I would also like to address what appears to be a misunderstanding, among some, about actions taken by other school districts in regards to the issue of school district requirements for educators to work in school during this health emergency. Here is what I learned. Yesterday, Bedford educators were required to work from school, and tomorrow will begin a choice model similar to the one we are adopting. My understanding is that Londonderry educators were required to work at school yesterday and perhaps even today, and will now follow a similar choice model. Hooksett educators worked from school today. Manchester educators worked from school today, among others. Yesterday, as you know, Merrimack educators and all personnel except administrators and custodians were required to stay home so that our maintenance staff could clean/disinfect our facilities to ensure as safe an environment as possible for them upon their return while they began

the preparation for remote learning. Today, educators were required to work at school and, as previously indicated, have now been offered a choice model as well.

Merrimack schools, like schools across the state and around the world, are trying to achieve two goals under enormously complicated circumstances. The first goal, as directed by state education and government officials, is to continue to provide students with as excellent an education as we can in the midst of this unprecedented emergency. The second, and co-equal goal, is to figure out how to do this while maintaining the safety of our valued employees. We will continue to do our best to respond to updated information and changing and sometimes contradictory directives in the service of those two goals.

Thank you.

Mark McLaughlin
Superintendent