

Dear Merrimack Families~

We have made it to the end of our first week of a strange new way of living. In just one week, almost everything that provides us with normalcy and routine has been upended. Very unsettling times. However, there are many bright spots in the midst of this uncertainty and since good news is in short supply these days, I'd like to end the week by sharing some with you.

Today, the Merrimack School District Food Services Department served 340 lunches to its families. Of those 340, 259 received lunch at our high school pick up location. Arriving families were greeted by our enthusiastic food services crew shaking Mexican Maracas in honor of what they determined was "Mexican Maraca Day." I am told that Monday will be "Crazy Hat Day" and I can't wait to see what that looks like. These folks, like all of us, have their own concerns about this current crisis but they are stepping out, stepping up, and helping us all to feel better. The remainder of served lunches today, 81, were delivered to those requesting them in a partnership with our bus company, STA. In total, just since Wednesday, the district has provided over 700 lunches to our families. The logistical challenges that this has presented to the Food Services team has been enormous given the very short window within which they had to gear up. We are deeply grateful to them all for their work.

Relative to technology, the first round of Chromebooks was handed out this week as well as iPads for PreK to grade 2. Starting next week we anticipate the arrival of more Chromebooks and quite possibly the opportunity to offer students Windows laptops. We continue to ask for your patience as we work through the logistics of this process. If you have a question about pickup, please contact the school you selected as the pickup location for more information. We are in the process of setting up tech support for families. Soon we will have a Tech Support icon on the bookmark bar of the Chromebooks, at the top of the Intranet, and in the COVID information sections of the school sites. You may also email support@sau26.org. Please include details about the problem you are having AND CURRENT CONTACT information. Finally, the technology and library staff are working to put together a range of information for accessing and using our systems, resources for research and reading, and other tools that will be helpful for the school community. Be on the lookout for more to come!

The final distribution of the first round of school work in support of our remote learning initiative was completed today. Next week, as we continue to migrate more to on-line platforms to maintain our remote learning initiative we will remain mindful of the needs of all our learners and will work with our families to ensure that students receive their work in whatever ways match their unique needs and circumstances. In the days and weeks ahead families will continue to see an increase in communication from their home schools, particularly in the context of ways in which remote learning will be delivered going forward. This is as it should be since, like before, each of our schools have unique cultures and we are working hard to maintain those to the best of our ability during these difficult days. Communication from familiar people, even if they are in unfamiliar settings, will go a long way toward providing calm and continuity to all our learners, whatever their ages.

In the midst of our scale up for the academic portion of our job as educators during this time of remote learning we are aware and very mindful that this situation challenges all of us to manage very real and unsettling fears. The chaotic nature of this unprecedented public health emergency has disrupted our lives in every way. Many students, of all ages, and certainly many adults as well are genuinely fearful and confused. All of us, no matter how old we are, can relate to these feelings and the need for solace and support. School age children miss the structure and routine of their classrooms. Teenagers, wired to socially connect, are being asked to stay inside and away from their peers. Parental concerns about the spread of this virus are compounded by the toll this is taking on the economy and individual finances.

As a district, our commitment to the social-emotional health and well-being of students and families guides us to respond with care and compassion. Please feel free to reach out to our School Counselors, Behavior Specialists and other support staff. Our District Family Resource Guide can offer you important links to area services that may be useful during this time, and, of course, our school lunch program is available to ensure that students have access to a healthy midday meal. Additionally, school websites will be frequently updated with information to help you and your family manage the emotions that this crisis is causing us all to feel. We will continue to face this challenge together, with courage, hope and optimism, offering this to our children as they live and learn through this experience. Lynn Lyons, an area expert in anxiety posed this question: When our children grow up and talk about 2020, what will they remember? We hope that we can support all of our families in ensuring that our students recall that they felt safe, strong and supported during this time.

The academic work that our district is providing to its students is a manifestation of our responsibility to our community to deliver an education, as best we can, to our students. Right now, the circumstances under which we are forced to take on that responsibility requires us to think entirely differently about what it means to teach and learn. It is very far from the ideal, but we are adjusting, remaining flexible, and attempting to find ways, wherever we can, to stay faithful to our obligations to our students and their families. Likewise, we encourage you to be flexible with yourselves as you come to terms with what it means to support your learners at home. We are providing you with school work as part of our commitment to you and as a way to provide opportunities for routine and focus during un-routine and unfocused times. Please know that taking it slow with your child's learning is okay. If the best you can do is go out to play in puddles, cook lunch together and watch an educational video...that is okay. We are not expecting your home to become a school classroom, but we want to provide resources to help you support your child's learning as best as you can, under these difficult circumstances. Our hope is that when this all ends, and it will, your children will come back to school ready to pick up and carry on, having learned that they can rely on the adults in their lives to be there for them and with them, and trusting that even in really difficult times, things can still work and good things can still happen.

As this week ends, I want to thank every single employee of the Merrimack School District. They all have families too. And worries too. And yet every one of them, professional staff, paraeducators, custodians, food service, administrative assistants, technology, library media staff, school and district administrators, central office staff, transportation staff, every one of them, has had a unique and vital role in demonstrating to our students that they are there for them and doing for them what they can to support them in times like none of us have ever seen. They are very special folks and I am proud of, and grateful to, them all.

Finally, I wish to thank our community of families who have shown so much caring for the schools and their neighbors this week. Every demonstration of thanks, offer of help and support, demonstration of care and concern for those less fortunate, has been a reflection of the goodness of this town. In the days and weeks ahead we will continue to work to transform all that caring into practical and coordinated action. Until then, please accept my thanks, on behalf of the school district, for the support shown to our schools and those we employ to operate them. We are deeply grateful.

I wish you rest this weekend. Be well.

Mark McLaughlin
Superintendent