

Dear Merrimack Families~

Today I spent a good deal of time traveling around the district visiting our schools to get a sense of how things are progressing for our educators, administrators, students and families under the current conditions. During my travels I observed teams of teachers at several schools collaborating on ZOOM to plan instruction and activities for the days and weeks to come. At other schools, teachers and administrators were on hand to continue the Chromebook/iPad distribution process while still other schools continued with packet distribution, particularly for those who were not part of the initial pick up process last week. And once again, the district food services department distributed lunch to our families. Today, 308 lunches were served, of which 87 were home delivered and the rest picked up at our high school location. In all cases, whatever the particular activity at the moment, our school district is clearly up and running and doing its work.

Interestingly, and not at all surprisingly, I have also started to hear from teachers and administrators that this week there seems to be an increase, at least among some of our families, in anxious feelings connected to the virus and the impact of it on our lives. The anxiety seems to be taking a variety of forms. Though by no means a complete list, some of the worries I heard about today as reported to our schools from some of our families include:

- Managing children's school work, particularly if children attend different schools or different grades within a school
- Fears about not completing work, or not completing it on time
- Concerns about dealing with challenging behaviors at home
- Worries about filling the day with activities outside of school work
- Balancing the demands of social distancing up against the natural/normal need to socialize (both adults and children)
- Financial strains for those recently unemployed or under employed as a result of the virus
- Fears for the health and well being of vulnerable family members and friends

I think any one of us can relate to these concerns and have felt them ourselves, in one way or another, over the last few weeks. These worries are not unique to Merrimack; they are truly universal. As we begin to establish new routines for the time being under these really challenging circumstances it is very understandable that our minds will begin to encounter new worries as we move from coming to terms with the crisis to living with it.

As many of you are aware, the school district has been working for the last several years on supporting the social and emotional needs of its students. As we have long since known an empty stomach is an impediment to learning. That is why a long time ago schools developed food service programs as a way to help address, if not completely remove, that impediment to create the conditions for better learning. Similarly, we have come to know that a crowded, worried and anxious mind is also an impediment to learning, and our educators and administrators have spent the last few years learning how to support students' emotional growth and development as a practical way to address, if not completely remove, that impediment as well.

In order to systematically address this growing challenge in our schools, our district led the state in tackling the issue of students' social emotional learning. Our District Mental Health Committee, now called the System of Care and Learning Supports (SOCALS) has been in the forefront of this work in New Hampshire, and has been recognized at the state level for its efforts. Even now, in the midst of this transition to remote learning, the SOCALS group has been meeting to address ways in which it can support students and their families during this very anxious time. Tonight, I wish to share with you some thoughts from that team in coordination with Lynn Lyons, a Concord, NH-based therapist, author, and specialist on anxiety in children, on dealing with the current stressful

situation. This is shared with you in the hopes that it helps some of our families to more effectively cope with what we all recognize are very worrying times. These are certainly suggestions only, intended for your consideration if they help. But now, more than ever, seems to be the time to rely on those who've been doing this work for some time to help us as we face some pretty unusual circumstances. Here are a few big take-aways:

- People with anxiety have difficulty tolerating uncertainty. In these uncertain times, we all have some anxiety. **Can you sit with uncertainty without having catastrophic thinking?**
- **Get occasional news updates vs. immersion.** If you're dealing with this in a way that becomes obsessive, back off.
- Empathize with your children at home when they're disappointed about missing friends. **This isn't just Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), this is actually missing out.** Be creative about ways they can connect with friends while maintaining distance.
- **Rigidity vs. flexibility-** determine what your family should be rigid about (i.e., hand washing, social distancing, having a reasonable family schedule) vs. what you can have flexibility about (i.e., screen time limits, wake up times, home cleanliness)
- **Eliminating anxiety is not the goal.** Recognize the anxiety, then reboot or reset (go outside, play a game).
- **Avoid talk of self-medicating to cope,** even as a joke (i.e., drinking wine, etc.). These are the moments that children learn coping mechanisms from caregivers.
- **Allow, acknowledge & pivot-** name the anxiety, then find a useful, adaptive way to shift thinking

Finally, the SOCALS team has shared the following links to Lynn Lyons' recent Facebook Live posts addressing anxiety in the era of COVID-19.

<https://www.facebook.com/149590011756107/videos/575575536383496/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/lynnlyonsanxiety/videos/1441617539351694>

Again, these are meant merely as resources to families struggling, like so many of us are, with a lot of worry right now. We all hope you find these hints and videos helpful as you navigate the days and weeks ahead.

Stay well.

Mark McLaughlin  
Superintendent