

Dear Merrimack Families and School District Staff~

As I write this Governor Sununu has recently concluded his afternoon press conference during which he made two important announcements that directly impact all of us in general, and schools in particular. The first important announcement was the governor's stay at home order, effective until May 4, 2020. The second announcement, and related, is his expectation that remote learning will continue in New Hampshire until that time at least. From my perspective, these announced decisions bring both a degree of clarity and a degree of concern. The clarity, which is helpful, is that we now know for certain what we have suspected for some time; the April 3rd date, originally announced, is not viable. For planning purposes, this announcement is helpful. The concern, as I am experiencing it, has to do with expectations around schooling in New Hampshire. Given the governor's announcement, which stipulates a stay at home order and, simultaneously, requires the continuation of remote learning, I feel obligated to share a genuine concern that we must all face together as a community: remote learning is possible only if those individuals who are necessary to provide it, and those who are intended to receive it, are physically able to do so. We are so pleased and grateful that our Merrimack community, both staff and students, seem to be weathering this crisis in generally good health. However, it would be irresponsible not to consider the very real possibility that this current status may change in the days and weeks to come. If such were to occur, the issue of sustaining remote learning would, of necessity, need to be reevaluated. Just as our Merrimack families are doing all they can and must for themselves and their families, so too are our staff of educators, custodians, food service providers, administrative assistants, technologists, and administrators. No one is immune from the effects of this current health crisis. As a result, we must consider what remote learning will look like in our school district if the very people upon whom we are relying to make it work are, for a period of time at least, unable to perform their duties as a result of this current health emergency. Since the announcement today did not address that very real concern I feel compelled to share it with you.

Our district, like many around the state and across the country, has done monumental work in just a few short days to transition almost all of our services to a remote format. We are continuing to refine this practice every day in our district. In fact, as recently as this morning our district leadership team met to discuss issues that we have already encountered, or will soon encounter, as we lean in to remote learning even more intensively. For example:

- the use of ZOOM as a remote learning tool
- how to address on-line behaviors that do not comport with our behavioral expectations during remote learning sessions
- how to assess school work across all grades
- how to account for high school students' work and grades to ensure they receive fair and proper credit
- how to prepare for the remote administration of our schools and central office operations in the event of illness or needs to self-quarantine
- how to support students who rely on special education services in cases where remote replication of those services is not possible in the current context

Our team continually meets to discuss these and many other implications of remote learning as part of our responsibility as school and district leaders and as a result of the absence of guidance on these matters from state education authorities. Since there has been no direction on these matters we are doing our best, as is every district in the state, to address these and many other issues according to our unique needs and according to our best judgment given available information. We are proud and prepared to deliver the best remote instruction to our students that is within our abilities to provide. And we will continue to do so for as long as we can.

My purpose in sharing these thoughts with you all is that the governor's announcement today highlights a reality that has not been discussed widely yet is, nevertheless, something very important for us all to contemplate as a community. Teaching and learning is a transaction between the teacher and the learner that is dependent on active and dynamic participation. This has never been more true now when the teacher and the learner are separated physically and joined only by a common agreement to maintain that participation. We have never before experienced such a profound impact on that transaction. Yet now, due to the COVID-19 emergency, we must consider, and plan for, the possibility of periodic interruptions to those teacher/learner transactions. My hope is that in the days to come additional guidance will be provided to assist local districts in dealing with some of the seeming contradictions in the stay at home/maintain remote learning requirements. Again, I want to stress that our school district is as committed as ever to our obligations and will continue to operate with rigor, and vigor, to ensure that we deliver the very best services we can to our students under these enormously challenging circumstances. However, if our recent experiences have proven anything it is that we must hope for the best and plan for the worst. In this current emergency, the worst would be a scenario in which, if even for a while, the very system relied upon to deliver remote instruction during this crisis was interrupted by the very thing that caused it to be necessary in the first place.

As always, the school district stands ready to serve. All of our personnel are doing extraordinary work under extraordinary circumstances, and grappling with issues and challenges the likes of which literally no previous generation of teachers had to contend. There continues to be no manual for how to deal with this and so we'll write one ourselves and leave it for others to benefit from in the event of some future repeat of such an event. Likewise, our students and our families are showing a similarly extraordinary response to this challenge. Every day I see evidence of humor, positivity, determination and resilience among our students and their families. This is easy for no one, but the partnerships and camaraderie between teacher and students, families and school communities, and neighbor to neighbor that have emerged from this crisis truly represent a silver lining to a pretty dark cloud. So it is that silver lining I choose to focus on tonight, along with a little dose of reality, which I hope will help us all advance better prepared for whatever comes next.

Stay well.

Mark McLaughlin
Superintendent