

Dear Merrimack Families~

One of the benefits of the passage of time is that it brings with it the opportunity to learn from past successes and failures in the development and implementation of future plans. Of course this can only happen in the context of reflection and openness to appropriate and purposeful change. This dynamic of reflection, refinement, implementation, reevaluation and further refinement lies at the very core of every successful educational endeavor. Indeed, the most effective teaching and learning cultures exist in the context of deep and continuous review by everyone party to that culture. The introduction of state and federal education standards nearly twenty years ago, accompanied by an explosion of technological advancements and access to information, fundamentally and permanently changed the conduct of teaching and learning. And rightly so. An old adage is appropriate here: *If the ground shifts under your feet, you better move your feet.* Educators, administrators, parents and, most importantly, students have been working very hard to keep up with the shifting ground of education for some time now, and while the process can be painful sometimes, confusing other times, and even frustrating most of the time, the alternative is unacceptable: It is simply no longer satisfactory to do what has always been done **because** it has always been done.

The Merrimack School District has been adjusting to the shifting ground of education just like every other school district in the state and across the country. We continue to innovate where possible, refine when necessary, reflect as a matter of course, and make it our business to take whatever lessons we can from all of that and turn it into a better delivery of service for our students. Most recently, that process of innovation has found expression in our district's Universal Design for Learning (UDL) initiative. Begun in earnest district wide last September, UDL is the manifestation of the idea that teaching and learning is most effective when both the teacher and the learner recognize the power and the possibility of flexibility. A core concept in UDL is the idea of the *multiple*, as in: there are *multiple* ways to learn, *multiple* ways to teach, and *multiple* ways to show what you know. Our district's teachers and support staff have spent years of professional development internalizing this core concept and related principles. And the process of learning about UDL specifically, reflecting on it, refining it, implementing it, and reevaluating it, within the framework of UDL and in the context of active teaching, has been the work of our educators and administrative team this school year. And then, within a matter of days, these core principles were put to the test when the sudden impact of COVID-19 shifted the ground for teachers and learners once again.

As a result of the current health emergency, over the last few weeks students, teachers and parents have been confronted with many questions:

- What does it mean to learn in an environment I'm not used to learning in?
- What does it mean to teach in an environment I'm not used to teaching in?
- What does it mean to support my child in an environment I'm not used to supporting them in?
- Can it look and be the same as it was?
- Should it look and be the same as it was?

In any good problem there are always more questions than answers, but in light of what has happened to all of us I would offer the following thought: While there is nothing good about the current crisis, it is possible to *make* something good out of it by embracing some of the lessons it is teaching us. Students and teachers are finding and using skills they perhaps didn't know they had. They are discovering new ways to teach, and learn, and represent that learning in creative and authentic ways. To the degree that any of the last few weeks have been even partially successful as an experiment in teaching and learning in this strange environment I would suggest

that at least some of that success is due to the readiness of the teachers and learners and families in our district to embrace the shifting ground. This is by no means to suggest that all has been as we wish it to be, nor is it to claim that we cannot improve the teaching/learning process, or that we still do not have much to learn about it. But if there is any silver lining to be found in the remote learning environment forced upon us by COVID-19, it may lie in the recognition that in our school district at least we've been trying for some time to avoid the pitfall of doing what has always been done just because it has always been done. COVID-19 forced the issue, and we will continue to respond to the lessons it is teaching us about flexibility and understanding.

I leave you tonight with an article written by a gentleman named Bill Wilmot who, along with his team, has done extensive work in Merrimack for the last two years leading our professional development program centered on UDL. It provides I think an interesting and useful insight into what this experience can teach us all about what we're capable of even in the most difficult times. [Keene Sentinel on UDL and remote learning](#) I hope you find it helpful.

Stay well.

Mark McLaughlin
Superintendent