

Dear Merrimack Families~

At last night's school board meeting we discussed items of particular and timely importance to our school and district operations in light of the current health crisis. Of those, I wish to highlight two now to provide as much clarity as I can on matters of great interest to all of us.

First, the board discussed the issue of maintaining remote learning for the remainder of the school year in recognition of the on-going health crisis and concerns for student and staff safety. The school board and school district administration are in agreement about the importance of this consideration, above all others, regarding the extension of remote learning, and determined at last night's meeting to await the governor's decision on this matter. Interestingly, just a few minutes ago Governor Sununu announced what we have been hoping for and anticipating for some time—in light of the deep uncertainty that still exists around safety due to COVID-19 schools in New Hampshire will remain closed, and remote learning will continue, through the remainder of the school year. While we are grateful for the certainty this affords us all in very uncertain times this news is still difficult to hear since it means we are not yet able to return to our normal lives. For educators, students and families it means our remote partnership will continue. We miss our students terribly and regret all we are not able to do with and for them as we normally would. These are very difficult days indeed. However, these are also days that require a focus on the positive and so I will remind everyone that our responsibility is to provide the best education we can to all our students no matter the conditions within which we provide them. We are doing that. It is not perfect. But it is very good and we try every day to improve. As a parent myself, I share the concern and even the frustration that many of you feel about the challenges of at home learning. That concern is real and the challenge it presents is significant and on-going. This reality is forced upon us by the virus. We are all doing the best we can given that reality. As I have said many times before, the virus did not stop school—it only stopped us from going to school. We have a job to do and so do students. We will continue to partner with families and students to ease the burden of at home learning however we can while maintaining standards and expectations appropriate to this new environment. Now, more than ever, we must partner. Look to your school as the source of information and support during the remainder of the school year. Work with your child's teacher or principal to share and discuss any and all barriers you are encountering in your efforts to support remote learning. We will address what we can, modify as needed, and partner with you to address these barriers. Nothing is insurmountable. Together, we are proving that every day.

The second issue the school board addressed last night concerned defining the end of the school year. There are two ways to calculate a school year; instructional days or instructional hours. We are all most familiar with calculating a school year by days—typically 180 for students. As you know, the school board recently surveyed the community and staff with regard to their feelings about April vacation, and the overwhelming consensus was that remote learning would continue through that break. This meant that our last day of school would be June 15th, if calculated by instructional days. Last night, we presented to the school board a school year end date based on calculations of instructional hours. In that case, the end date of school would lie somewhere between May 28th and June 5th. Presented with those options, the school board voted last night to authorize the district administration to calculate the school year by instructional hours, with the understanding that the final date would be determined and shared with them, and the community, as soon as final calculations have concluded. This final calculation will be completed by, and shared at, next Wednesday's school board meeting. For now, however, it is important to understand that based on the school board's action last night the current academic year will conclude somewhere

within the window of May 28th and June 5th. We appreciate that additional clarity provided by the school board's action so that we can continue necessary planning on considerably firmer ground.

Questions about high school graduation are on-going and school district and high school administration will continue to work with stakeholders to determine the best way to honor our seniors in an environment that requires responsible planning for students, family and staff safety. While the interests and needs of all our students motivate every decision we make, for obvious reasons the very unique interests and needs of our seniors occupies us daily in a special way. We are committed to doing our best for them as the calendar rolls toward the end of their time in the Merrimack School District.

Clearly, despite the clarity we now have in terms of the extension of remote learning through the end of the school year and the decision to calculate instructional hours, there will be many questions we will need to address in the days and weeks to come. We will continue to provide updates as we have them to keep our community as informed as we can during this unprecedented time. In appreciation of the collective efforts of our students, families and staff through this challenge, I wish you all the best, as always.

Stay well.

Mark McLaughlin
Superintendent