

Dear Merrimack Families~

I hope this finds you all well and enjoying the early days of this unusual summer. I am writing this evening to provide you all with an update on the progress of our various District School Reopening Task Force groups. As you know, nine separate groups, comprising over one hundred people representing a cross section of our school district community, including parents/community members, teachers and administrators, are working very hard every day to determine a set of recommendations concerning the safest and most effective way to reopen schools in the fall. Among the wide variety of work these task force groups are engaged in, here are just a few examples of what they have been up to:

- evaluating current and future conditions relative to the possible scope and progress of the virus and impact on schools and schooling
- reviewing and understanding research relative to virus spread, responsible safety precautions for school buildings and classroom settings, and infrastructure improvements (maintenance etc.) to prepare for and maintain safe and healthy school spaces
- developing multiple scenarios for schooling in a number of contexts (remote, live in school, hybrid).
 - curriculum and instruction
 - learning platforms (technology)
 - achieving standards
 - effective assessment
 - scheduling
 - transportation
 - food service
 - athletics
 - health and hygiene
- working with task force parents to assess their experience as end users of a remote learning model as required by executive order in March, including the development of a survey to reach out directly to all other parents to assess their views on the following:
 - what worked?
 - what did not work?
 - what could be improved?
 - what should be maintained?
 - parental/guardian concerns about learning, health and safety etc?

At the moment, there is much that is still uncertain about what school will look like in the fall. However, we have also begun to recognize certain patterns in the way folks seem to be responding to this situation as it continues to evolve. In general,

- we want things to be as they were (normal) as much as possible
- we want the virus to have as little impact on our daily lives as possible
- we want to keep ourselves, our children and our family and friends safe

The question we will continue to have to ask ourselves over the coming weeks is this: Can we reasonably have all the things that will make these goals possible in place as early as this September, with little or no discernible impact on school operations?

Here are a few things our various task force groups are considering:

- What will it be like to teach and learn in the context of on-going (if diminished viral spread)?

- We don't have experience with this yet since school shut down before the virus took hold in New Hampshire, and as a consequence all learning was remote.
- If restaurants, banks, hair salons, and other places in which people gather, including public concerts and a multitude of summer events, are reflecting the continued presence of virus in their policies and practices (and in some cases significantly curtailing their services—or providing them with significant limitations and restrictions) can and should schools follow suit? In other words, how do we deliver our unique services, subject to at least the same concerns as those other entities, if not more, and do so in a manner that prioritizes the health and safety of our clients and staff just as much as those entities are doing for theirs?
- What are the possible trade offs/compromises we may have to consider and accept in order to achieve our two primary functions: the education of our students in conditions of health and safety.

I have asked for initial recommendations from our various task force group by June 30th. That is a swift timeline, but our window for decision making is necessarily limited. Any decision made based off of task force recommendations comes with a variety of implications for planning, scheduling, purchasing etc. and MUST occur within a timeframe that allows for these decisions to be operationalized. Sadly, there is no crystal ball to tell us what to do, and no clear path as to how to proceed. This is why our school district, like so many others, is so carefully scrutinizing information as it comes to us in the context of our various task force groups. We want to be sure that we move forward with the best information available to us at the time decisions have to be made. And above all, we must be sure that whatever path we take supports the goal of creating the conditions for maximizing the health and safety for our students and staff. Ultimately, we may disagree on what it may take to do that, but I am sure we will not disagree on the goal itself.

Within the next few weeks we will be sending out a survey to the school district parent community seeking its input on a variety of issues related to reopening. When that survey is ready, we will be sure to publicize it so that we may receive as broad a response to the survey as possible to further add to our evolving data set to be used for final decision making purposes. In the meantime, please accept my thanks, on behalf of the employees and friends of the Merrimack School District, for your continued support. Not since the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 have we seen a crisis quite like this and schools, like so many other parts of our local, national and international communities, are facing unprecedented challenges in the face of this pandemic. Together, we can and will do the right thing, for the right reasons, for the students of our community.

Thank you all.

Stay well.

Mark McLaughlin
Superintendent