

Dear Merrimack Families~

At Monday night's meeting of the Merrimack School Board, District administration unveiled its plan for school reopening. It did so in order to provide Merrimack families with timely information about school reopening in order to maximize time that families will have to assess the impact of the plan on their unique situations and, of course, to plan accordingly.

Our goal, as always, is the full return to normal school operations. No one wishes to be in this situation. The challenges for each of us, students, parents, teachers and so many others are unique and extraordinary. We fully recognize the burden we all face as we try to balance the desire to return to normalcy with the fact that this virus can still pose a significant threat, particularly in the context of a return to school and the challenges such a return will create. Despite a recognition of those challenges, the District is working hard to make incremental strides towards normalcy while at the same time respecting and addressing the very real concerns still posed by the virus.

The goal of this letter is to provide families and staff with some important information concerning school reopening to assist in the evaluation of the choices that we are asking you all to make in order to assist the District in its further planning for the fall (See District website for information from Mr. Shevenell and Mr. Fabrizio, specifically.).

First, it is important to reiterate that because we continue to be in a very fluid and frequently changing environment with regard to COVID-19, any school reopening plan must itself be fluid and flexible. Our proposed plan is designed to reflect and respond to the changing conditions of this unpredictable situation. **That said, this plan is temporary** and will be reviewed at the end of October or sooner as conditions warrant.

The plan is to reopen schools based on a **hybrid model** (2 days of on location learning, 2 days of remote learning, one FLEX day).

This decision was reached after extensive research and work conducted by over 125 teachers, administrators and parents who worked across nine separate task force groups to determine the best way to reopen schools with student and staff safety and academic integrity as our chief goals. **Relative to student and staff safety**, the hybrid model was developed and proposed first and foremost because it significantly reduces the number of people in a school building on any given day, thus allowing a return to school under conditions where social distancing, a known safety protocol, can be much more readily achieved, managed and sustained than the full return to school of all students would ever allow. This model also enhances our ability to maintain clean and safe work, learning and play spaces, as well as other safety protocols that the District will put in place.

Relative to academic integrity, the proposed hybrid model allows for smaller class sizes for in-person learning (school) and for remote learning (home). The goal of this model is to provide more opportunities for students to maximize their learning experience by providing them the opportunity to engage in more individualized and personalized instruction and learning and

to reestablish the personal connections that suffered so much during the full closure of schools in the spring. I would remind the community that there was little to no warning in the spring about the virus or its impact on our local, state and national community. Pivoting to full time remote instruction as quickly as every school district did placed a huge burden on educators who very quickly had to learn and implement entirely new ways of accomplishing their professional responsibilities. The phrase *building the plan while it's flying* was never more apt than in schools' response to this incredible challenge. Likewise, families too had to pivot with similarly little time to comprehend, much less plan for, the impact of the virus on their professional lives or the academic experiences of their children. We were then, and are now, in this together. Let me be clear. There is no substitute for full time in school learning. We all know that. And no one wants anything less. However, the question before the District now is not what we want but more what we must do given a situation none of us asked for but is nevertheless the situation we are in that, in our view, requires the achievement of a balance between normalcy and safety like never before.

That being said, as a school system, we have one advantage now that we did not have last spring: experience. And we have the time--though not much--to reflect on and improve upon the learning experience of our students while the threat of the virus continues to challenge our ability to return to normal schooling. Our teachers and staff have done nothing but reflect on improvements since the school year ended, and some of that improvement work was shared at Monday night's school board meeting—those plans and many details of these improvements can be found on our District website, and we encourage you to consult them as you seek information to adequately respond to the recently sent questionnaire.

Once again, the plan summary:

- Monday/Tuesday—One-half of all students (Group A) at any given school will attend school on location.
- Monday/Tuesday—One-half of all students (Group B) at any given school will participate in remote learning
- Wednesday/Thursday—One-half of all students (Group A) at any given school will participate in remote learning
- Wednesday/Thursday—One-half of all students (Group B) will attend school on location
- Friday is a FLEX day. (More details will follow in August.)

Parents/students will also be offered the option of attending school full-time remotely:

- A questionnaire was sent to parents last night asking which of those options (hybrid or full-time remote) they will choose for their child/children for at least the first two months of the upcoming school year. Here's the hard part for all of us: parents need as many details as they can get to be more fully informed with regard to responding to the questionnaire. But as was expressed to the Board on Monday, not every detail will be known before plans will need to be made by the District and each of its schools. That is the fundamental challenge we are all facing at the

moment: *either* delay planning until closer to the start of school and lose every time advantage we have now, and did not have in the spring, to plan and prepare as much and as well as possible, *or* plan now as well as possible, using the slight time advantage we have, and lose the opportunity to know how the virus, and its impacts, will unfold over the coming weeks. For the District, it is a practical matter-at some point very soon we must have a sense of those we will serve in the hybrid model and those we will serve in the fully remote model. Relative to planning for the fall, that basic information is absolutely necessary.

Here are some details we can share:

The official start of school for this upcoming school year has been moved back to September 9th. This will allow the District to better prepare for the implementation of the hybrid model.

Significant efforts are underway to prepare our school buildings with safety features designed to enhance safety protocols. (Please consult District website for detailed information from Matt Shevenell.). Additionally, significant efforts are underway to adapt our curriculum and instruction practices to the hybrid model and full-time remote instruction (Please consult District website for detailed information from John Fabrizio.). Additional details about the progress of these efforts will be shared at the next school board meeting on August 10th.

The initial reopening phase will extend from September 9th to October 30th, at which time there will be a review to determine whether the plan will continue or be modified in any way based on conditions at the time. Again, it is important to note that at any time between the start of school and October 30th the District may need to modify this plan in response to changing dynamics of the virus. This kind of possible modification cannot be predicted, but it can be planned for, which the District is doing as we speak.

Monday night's meeting was the first step in a much longer process of planning for a successful reopening of our schools in this hybrid model. We wish we had all the answers now for our community, as we recognize the significance of the choices and decisions we are asking you all to make. To be sure, many important additional details will be shared at the next school board meeting in August as they continue to be worked on by our staff over the next month. However, it is likely, if not necessary, to anticipate that many additional details will need to be addressed throughout August and even into the new school year. We will continue to do our best to provide timely communication regarding updates to our plan as they are developed, in a manner that provides actionable information to our students, parents and staff. But again, it is not possible to know, much less provide, as much information as I know parents and staff want, and need, particularly in regards to completing the *return to school survey*. This is, again, one of the many regrettable and seemingly unavoidable instances in which the virus has blocked a path to easy answers.

A few other details, however, can be clarified immediately and deal with the question of virus safety protocols in the school setting. To be clear, given the wide variety of opinions in our community with regard to the enforcement of certain safety protocols/mitigation strategies

the hybrid model offers the best chance of achieving social distancing (a very successful and research-based safety protocol) with few enforcement challenges; limiting the number of people in a school building makes social distancing much easier to achieve. In addition, Mr. Shevenell's PowerPoint (found on the District website) speaks to the many significant additional mitigation efforts that have already been achieved and will continue to be achieved by the start of school. While this information will not address every concern and possible question, we feel that it provides a clear insight into the strategies the District is employing to mitigate risk to students and staff in the hybrid model, thus providing some basis upon which to make an informed decision concerning the form of school attendance in the fall.

The use of masks has, unfortunately, become one of the many points of disagreement that seems increasingly to prevent a collective response to the challenges we all face as a result of this virus. The research on the effectiveness of masks in mitigating virus transmission is absolutely clear; it significantly reduces its likelihood. If it were that simple, there would be no question as to the District's position. However, like so many things related to the challenge this virus presents, the matter is not so simple. For schools, it is a matter of something much more practical—enforcement. For example, the Governor's lack of a mask mandate in his back to school guidance undercuts any District's ability to effectively enforce such a requirement if made locally. And despite the governor's broad allowance of local control on many matters related to school reopening, the lack of state guidance on masks, despite their well-known safety benefits, provides a significant opening to challenge any local prohibition by those who would strongly disagree with such a mandate. Therefore, given the wide variety of opinions in our community with regard to the use of masks, despite the clear evidence of their effectiveness at viral mitigation, the matter would quickly become one of enforcement. This puts the burden of enforcement on teachers, other staff and administrators and opens up a range of unintended consequences that come with the establishment of a hard and fast rule, particularly in a matter such as this. For example, staff resources spent enforcing such a mandate takes time away from the teacher's primary responsibility of educating our students. Additionally, potential legal challenges to such enforcement have been significantly enhanced by the state's decision not to enforce the wearing of masks in the school setting. The time and financial drain on addressing these challenges will be better be spent encouraging good practices and focusing on maximizing the time and resources we do have on our students' education. Therefore, it is the position of the Merrimack School District that the use of masks by students is strongly encouraged. Further, we ask parents to support the District's efforts to mitigate viral transmission and enhance safety protocols during the on-location portion of the hybrid model by encouraging the use of masks by students in the school setting. However, if it is the choice of a student/parent not to wear a mask in the school setting, that choice will be allowed. Given the likelihood that at least some members of our District school community will not elect to wear a mask in the school setting, we have developed, of necessity, alternative strategies (primarily the enforced social distancing of the hybrid model) to achieve some of our most important safety goals (See Mr. Shevenell's PowerPoint, available on the District website.).

Expectations for school staff relative to the use of masks will be developed and released within the next few weeks but will include, at a minimum, an equally strong recommendation for the use of masks.

On this point I wish to be very clear. The responsibility to mitigate viral transmission must be shared equally among all members of our community. The burden of achieving and maintaining safety protocols during this continued outbreak, however reduced **at the moment**, cannot fall solely on the schools in the absence of equal partnership among all members of any given community on a matter of such importance.

In the coming days and weeks, the District will continue to share information with the community concerning its reopening plans. We look forward to partnering with you all to make the upcoming school year as successful as it can possibly be under the circumstances.

Finally, please know that the District is painfully aware of the challenge this situation poses for our families and staff. There are no perfect options and no easy answers and no one wants to endure this any longer than we have to. But the balance we are trying to achieve between education and the safety of our students and staff requires us to all to make some hard choices. It is our deepest hope that with continued shared responsibility we can beat back this challenge once and for all and bring our students, and all of our lives, back to normal. Until then, please know we are doing our very best to care for and educate your children and our staff under these extraordinary conditions.

Thank you and stay well.

Mark McLaughlin