

Dear Merrimack Families and District Staff~

I am writing tonight to provide you with a few important updates regarding recent developments in our district related to the Coronavirus and to answer a few questions that have been coming our way now that the routines of this new and unusual school year are being felt by the school district community.

While we all still feel the genuine excitement and happiness of a few weeks ago when we welcomed back our students, whether hybrid or remote, the realities of life in a pandemic continue to reveal themselves in real and uncomfortable ways. This week, at Merrimack High School, two students tested positive for COVID-19. Through extensive and on-going collaboration with NH DHHS we have learned that, for the time being, there does not appear to be any in-school transmission of the virus resulting from these two positive cases, which themselves appear to be unrelated (students do not share classes). Further, our best understanding, from NH DHHS and our own investigation (including our own contact tracing) is that these two cases originated from sources outside the school.

As part of our district's protocol in such cases, upon learning of the positive results, administrators at the high school conducted an investigation to determine if our internal safety protocols were followed. This investigation included asking all the teachers of each student (and where possible the students themselves) the following questions:

1. In your class, on each day the student(s) was in attendance, to the best of your knowledge did the student(s) wear his/her mask according to school district policy?
2. In your class, on each day the student(s) was in attendance, to the best of your knowledge did the student(s) maintain proper social distancing of 6 feet or more?
3. Were there any other occasions you observed (outside of lunch) where the mask policy was not followed?
4. Were there any other occasions you observed where social distancing requirements were not followed?

The purpose of these questions is not to "catch" a student doing something wrong, but rather to help in determining if certain behaviors could have created possible exposure opportunities for other students or staff. This is essential information when conducting effective contact tracing and when collaborating with NH DHHS for the same purpose and in deciding appropriate next steps. I am pleased to report that in both instances students appear to have followed all safety protocols consistently and completely. Since the decision to return to school in a hybrid model, we have understood the very real possibility that the coronavirus would impact our schools. That is why the District has worked hard to develop extensive policy, maintenance and other safety measures to limit such impacts. For now, and with the active cooperation of our students and the support of their families, these measures are working as intended.

At the moment, NH DHHS has assigned a case manager to work with school and district leaders throughout this process. We will follow all guidance they provide and will implement additional measures the district deems necessary to address safety concerns. As has so often been the case with the COVID-19, developments occur quickly and change frequently. We are continuing to monitor this issue through the weekend and will share additional information as it becomes available and when it is accurate and verified.

I understand that social media often catches things quickly and runs with whatever it hears, but given the significance of these issues we simply will not provide any information until we have clearly

understood it and all its implications. Therefore, it may often be the case that the community will “hear” something from others before it hears something from the District. But I can assure you that, to the very best of our ability, what you hear from the District will be accurate and as timely as the circumstances allow.

Particularly in light of these recent developments, we feel it is important to address a few questions that have been asked by parents, students and members of the community. The actual experience of being back in school, whether hybrid or remote, has prompted several questions and reflections, and we will begin to address them regularly as they come to us.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why has my child been sent home from school for a few sniffles or other mild symptoms? We work and this is very inconvenient, especially when it doesn’t seem at all necessary.

Ever since this situation began, we have said that we are not able to differentiate between COVID-19 symptoms and any other kind of related symptom. To do so would be to put our students and staff at risk of possible exposure. Unfortunately, common every day symptoms often mimic those of COVID-19, and we cannot take the chance of guessing which kind of illness your child’s symptom might be signifying. This is also true for all staff members, who are daily required to sign and submit an attestation form that requires them to answer questions related to the presence or absence of symptoms. Our goal is to keep school operational for as long as we can. Until this virus is more controlled, we must and will maintain very strict adherence to symptom protocols.

Is there a “right” kind of mask to wear?

The Merrimack School District policy specifically requires the wearing of masks at all times when on school property, except for designated mask breaks. It does not stipulate the kind of mask to be worn. However, certain masks are more effective than others at preventing spread. Specifically, masks with vents, and gaiters, are not effective at preventing virus transmission. We strongly encourage the use of cloth or paper masks. Please consult your physician for guidance on the best kind of mask for your child to wear in a school setting.

When will co-curricular activities, like clubs, be allowed to begin?

Any co-curricular or club activity that can meet remotely or outside may begin as soon as practicable. However, any co-curricular or club activity that must meet indoors will not be allowed. Daily safety protocols, conducted by our maintenance staff on extended evening shifts, require school buildings to be emptied as soon as possible at the end of the school day. In addition, we continue to limit public access to school property in an effort to control virus introduction into our schools.

Will before school or after school programs be allowed to resume? If so, when?

For the time being, the District will not allow before or after school programs to operate within its school buildings. As with the question above, maintenance protocols and the need to limit public access to school buildings in order to maintain school functions remains our top priority.

I have said this before many times. These are terribly complicated days and all of us, in one way or another, have been deeply impacted by this seemingly never ending crisis. We all want to return to normal. The inconvenience and duration of this crisis has been tough on everyone. But the simple fact is that it continues, as events of this week reveal. While we hope for the best, we are also realists and

understand that more difficult days may lie ahead. In the meantime, we will continue to do all we can to maintain school operations and to do so as safely as we can.

Thank you, as always, for your support of your students, their teachers and all those working to keep schools the centerpiece of our strong and resilient community.

Mark McLaughlin
Superintendent