

Dear Merrimack Families~

At last night's special school board meeting district administration presented a recommendation concerning the status of schools from Thanksgiving to Martin Luther King Jr. Day in January. The presentation was based on the following facts and data:

- Community spread in New Hampshire has dramatically increased over the past two weeks, including in Merrimack.
- While there has been no transmission of the virus within our schools, there has been a significant increase in the number of staff and students absent due to COVID related issues
 - Increase in close contacts with COVID positive individuals, in many cases requiring quarantine
 - Increase in symptoms that mirror those of COVID-19, in most cases requiring testing to confirm or negate its presence
 - Increase in total numbers of students and staff testing positive, in all cases requiring quarantine
- Substitute availability for class coverage in the event of an absence, at all levels, is dramatically lower this year than last year, and has decreased further over the last few weeks, resulting in an increasing inability to adequately and safely provide coverage for classes
- In order to make up for the lack of substitute coverage non-classroom staff, including administrators, have been deployed in increasing numbers to cover classrooms, impacting the services they are required to deliver as part of their specific job responsibilities
- The decision of other school districts to go remote (Londonderry and Milford), coupled with the possibility of other districts making similar decisions in the coming weeks, increases the possibility of further staff impacts due to child care issues arising from staff living in those other districts

These impacts have combined to create a significant and growing challenge to our ability to safely and effectively maintain live in person instruction during the upcoming holiday season, when the data suggests the very real possibility of increasing COVID impacts in our community, and thereby adversely impacting our schools. In the face of these unfortunate realities, we have two choices

1. Wait for a situation to arise in which our ability to effectively or safely manage school and district operations is significantly compromised, at which time we would have to pivot to sudden and unplanned closure
2. Observe the current situation, anticipate likely future impacts, and plan to transition to alternative schooling in order to maximize what is possible to achieve for our students

Given these choices, we made the following recommendation to the school board last night:

- Return to remote instruction from November 30, 2020 through January 18, 2021
- On **Monday, November 23rd**, all **Cohort A students** will attend school as usual
- On **Tuesday, November 24th**, all **Cohort B students** will attend school, though this is NOT a typical Cohort B day.
- On **November 30 and December 1**, all staff will plan for transition to remote instruction
 - **No school for students**
- On **Wednesday, December 2nd**, all **Cohort A students** will attend school remotely
- On **Thursday, December 3rd**, all **Cohort B students** will attend school remotely
- On **Monday, December 7th**, students will resume their normal schedules
- Additional information will be provided to families directly from each school

- **Return to hybrid instruction on January 19, 2021**

After serious and thoughtful consideration, the school board voted to approve this recommendation.

These are terribly challenging times. As a father of two sons both of whom have been deeply affected by this virus' impacts on their schooling, I understand only too well the seriousness of the current situation. But the reality is this virus is affecting all of us in ways we cannot always predict or control. This is especially true in the context of our schools. This is a reality none of us like and all of us wish were different. But for the time being, it is a reality that we must deal with as best we can. To our very core, that is what we are trying to do.

As we enter this next phase and look forward to the Thanksgiving holiday, I wish all our Merrimack students, their families, and all our staff, the very best.

Mark McLaughlin
Superintendent