

March 13, 2020

Good Morning Merrimack Families:

As a parent of a high-school student and a college student, I am well aware of all the concerns related to COVID-19. I have them, too.

I am writing this morning to provide a brief update about what we know about COVID-19 in the state of New Hampshire and the Merrimack School District's response to it.

First, factual information is very important for all of us at this time as we seek to understand this virus. For this reason, Merrimack and districts throughout the south central region of New Hampshire and beyond have been relying on the state Department of Health and Human Services, the state Department of Education, and the Centers for Disease Control to provide the best science-based guidance known at this time. Clearly, this is a fluid situation that has changed daily, and what is known now as fact may be contradicted later today by additional facts that have come to light as further study and experience with the virus replaces old information. However, at each step of this evolving process we must rely on the people who have been working day and night to study the virus to guide us through our response to it.

As of this morning, this is what is known:

- According to DHHS, there are 6 positive cases of COVID-19 in New Hampshire.
- According to DHHS, none of those cases are the result of community transmission.
- There are no cases of COVID-19, either among students or staff, in the Merrimack School District.
- One Merrimack high-school teacher had casual contact (co-attended an event) with a teacher last weekend who works in a Massachusetts school; that school has a parent with a confirmed case of COVID-19. As soon as we learned of this casual contact, and out of an abundance of caution, we asked that teacher to remain home until further notice. The Massachusetts teacher is symptom free, as is the Merrimack high-school teacher. Both the CDC and NH DHHS have classified such interactions as extremely low incidence for transmission.
- The one MHS staff member and the one MHS contracted service provider who traveled to a CDC Level-3 country during February break were asked to self-quarantine last week. They will remain in self-quarantine until next Thursday, March 19, per CDC guidelines. As of this morning, they are well and remain symptom free.

Of course, there is still much that is unknown. Today, as over the last few days, I will be seeking more clarification about those unknowns, from officials whose responsibility it is to provide the guidance to help us all make responsible decisions.

Early afternoon yesterday, March 12, I joined colleagues from around the state on a conference call with Education Commissioner Edelblut to discuss the latest DHHS/CDC recommendations and the Department of Education's response to it. At this time, the DHHS has not recommended school closure for any district in the state of New Hampshire. While this may change again, as of today, the DHHS has not recommended school closure due to COVID-19.

In light of that, late afternoon yesterday, March 12, I convened our entire district Leadership Team, (principals, assistant principals, directors and central office administration) to continue to discuss and expedite our district's plan for one or two possible decisions:

- 1) Our plans to maintain instruction for students in the event of a mandatory closure of our schools
- 2) Our plans to provide instruction to students in the event schools remain open but individual families elect to keep their students home during this time. Those plans are moving along quickly, and I will report back to you later this afternoon with updates concerning those efforts.

As educators, we have two responsibilities: to keep our students safe while educating them to the best of our ability. In such uncharted territory as we have all so quickly found ourselves, it is essential that the schools and the community partner together to address this unprecedented challenge. For some families, school closure, should it come, will present a remarkable hardship as it will impact people's livelihoods. For some students, the interruption of regular classroom instruction could deeply impact their academic progression. And, of course, overlaying all of that is everyone's safety. Given these very difficult realities, we must come to some agreements.

In my afternoon update, I will discuss this in more detail, but for now I will reiterate that we all must make the best decisions we can, given known facts and after assessing risks. Regardless of any decision the district takes over the next hours or days, it is important to remind everyone that we share in these decisions, and that any decision made by families on behalf of their students will be supported by the school district in whatever way we can. This includes being flexible around excused absences and providing at home work and other avenues to support students during periods of absence. Just as the district must make decisions based on the responsibilities we have to protect students and to provide an education to students, individual families must feel empowered to do the same as they see fit.

This afternoon, after further consultations with NH DOE, NH DHHS, CDC and officials from the town and neighboring districts, I will provide an additional update with more specific information about next steps.

Until that time, please know that we are working as hard as we can to make our schools safe and to provide our students with an excellent education.

I will be in touch again later today.

Thank you.

Mark McLaughlin

Superintendent