

Dear Merrimack Families~

In my last message of the school year, I indicated that I would follow up from time to time throughout the summer with updates on issues facing the school district. This evening, I write with two such updates.

First, last Saturday's Merrimack High School graduation marked the official end of the 2019-2020 school year. And what a fantastic way to demonstrate to our community, and to each other, the power and the possibility afforded to each of us in difficult times when we stand together in the face of a challenge and seek ways to overcome it. Our seniors, and their families, exemplified the very best of this community at their graduation ceremonies; recognizing that this year's ceremonies would have to be different, all commencement attendees exhibited grace, patience, understanding, gratitude and pleasure at the opportunity to celebrate something very special even in the midst of the most challenging circumstances. Rather than complain about things that could not be changed, our students and their families chose, instead, to accept the day as it had to be and focused on all that had been achieved, all that had been earned, and all the possibilities that lay ahead. It was a wonderful day, made all the better by our students and their families who embraced what is good and what is possible and who persisted in that positive focus despite significant hurdles. It was a wonderful way to end a difficult school year and a reminder that bad results are not inevitable if we work on overcoming challenges constructively and cooperatively. I congratulate all our seniors for reaffirming this most important lesson in such a spectacular way.

Second, now that the 2019-2020 school year is in the books, the Merrimack School District is hard at work on plans for reopening in the fall. Actually, we have been working on this next challenge for many weeks already, and now with the focus afforded by the end of last school year, we are redoubling our efforts to plan for what school reopening will look like come September. So much can and will happen over the coming summer months that will impact the final reopening plan, but this much is certain- things will have to be different, and difference will require patience and understanding as we work to develop a plan that recognizes the need to provide a safe and healthy environment for our students to learn in and our staff to work in. Much as we would all wish for a return to the old normal, we must prepare ourselves for a return to a different normal in order to accommodate all that has changed as a result of COVID-19.

As of today, nine separate task forces have begun work on specific areas of school and school district operations all linked by one specific goal- to determine the best way to reopen schools in some form in the fall. The task force groups are:

- a. Dual On Location/Remote Learning Task Force
  - i. Educator Professional Development
  - ii. Curriculum
  - iii. Remote Learning Platforms/Tools
- b. Infrastructure Task Force

- c. Health and Hygiene Task Force
- d. Special Education Task Force
- e. Student Wellness Task Force (Mental Health)
- f. Transportation Task Force
- g. Food Services/Delivery Task Force
- h. Athletics/Co-Curricular Task Force
- i. Parent Task Force

Task force membership is comprised of specialists in each field and includes parents/community members, and outside experts. The multiple experiences, viewpoints and perspectives on the issue of school reopening will not only be welcomed but encouraged in order to develop as thorough a plan as possible. Initial recommendations are due to the Superintendent by June 30, with the expectation that significant additional work will need to continue throughout the summer. No one was prepared for the magnitude of impact on school operations that this pandemic brought about in March. And while it is not possible to fully prepare for every possible outcome that may impact us between now and September, and beyond, we will do our best to develop a planful and thoughtful approach to school reopening that balances student and staff health with our obligations to provide the very best education we can to the students who depend on us to do so.

As with the challenges we have faced so far, we will continue to seek the best solution to the next set of challenges presented by school reopening and, as before, we'll rely on the help and support of our school and town community in that process. Given the enormity and importance of the task ahead, I look forward to extending the lessons learned over the last few months-that positive and constructive engagement in the service of a greater common goal provides the greatest likelihood of a successful outcome.

Thank you and stay well.

Mark McLaughlin  
Superintendent