



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS

Office of the Superintendent

Michael LaSusa

mlasusa@chatham-nj.org

259 Lafayette Avenue, Chatham, NJ 07928

(973) 457-2501

July 31, 2020

Dear Parent,

I am writing to you to apprise you of where we stand with our plans to reopen school on August 31.

Before I get there, I would like to thank you for all of your input and support over the past month and more. Nearly all parents completed the surveys sent in June and July, and many other parents reached out to me directly. I will share that I have had numerous parents who are physicians provide me with detailed thoughts and input regarding the health and safety considerations involved in opening schools. There is not even unanimity of thought among these parents and professionals, which I think underscores the fact that what follows in this letter is of course subject to debate and opinion-rendering. There are no hard and fast answers to many of the questions and issues we are dealing with right now. We are trying to do the best we can to open our schools safely, provide students with the school experience they need, and weigh myriad factors associated with COVID-19 and the education of children. It is not possible to please everyone, assuage all fears, and be “right” about everything. Our decisions continue to be guided by the guidance documents released by the [CDC](#), [AAP](#), and [NJDOE](#).

When we return to school in August, the following plan will be in effect:

- **Students in grades PK-5 will return on a Plan A schedule**
 - PK-K will follow the same am/pm schedule that has been in place in prior years.
 - Grades 1 - 5 will follow the Plan A, abbreviated day, schedule.
- **Students in grades 6-12 will return on a Plan B schedule**

There are five reasons we are making a distinction between our elementary-aged students and our secondary students.

1. According to the CDC, and as confirmed by our Department of Health officials, there is reason to distinguish between the populations within our schools in terms of COVID-19. The populations are:
 - Students under the age of 10, who *may* be *less* involved in transmission of the virus than older children, and who appear to be at lower risk from serious illness. ([CDC](#))

- Students ages 11 - 19, who *may be as* involved in the transmission of the virus as adults, and who also appear to be at lower risk from serious illness.
- All staff members, who are more vulnerable to serious illness from COVID-19. ([CDC](#), [NJDOH](#))

Based on this information and input from the Department of Health officials, keeping staff distanced from other staff and students is a greater priority than keeping students distanced from students. Given the size of younger students versus older students, as well as the factors outlined below, we feel more confident about creating space in our elementary schools than in our secondary schools.

2. The number of students at CMS or CHS is vastly greater than the number of students distributed throughout our elementary schools. Consider the following:
 - K-5
 - Grade levels range in size from **181 to 301** students.
 - The average grade level has 257 students.
 - 6-12
 - Grade levels range in size from **306-363** students.
 - The average grade level has 335 students.
 - PK-5
 - Total student population of **1,587** housed in **four** school buildings
 - 6-12
 - Total student population of **2,343** housed in **two** school buildings

3. The numbers manifest themselves in spacing challenges at the secondary level. We have exercised further diligence about this since my last update in two ways. First, thanks to you, we collected preliminary information on how many students would not return to school under Plan A. Roughly 20% of parents indicated they would not send their children to school under Plan A, and this percentage was fairly consistent across the grade levels. Of that 20%, most would send their children to school under Plan B, but the percentage that would do so skewed slightly higher toward the secondary level. In other words, the reduction of students in either Plan is not overwhelming at any one level, but more students would return to school under Plan B at the secondary level than the elementary level. Second, our principals and custodial crews have set up dozens of classrooms in the district to determine physical distancing with full classes or classes with a 20% reduction in students. Some schools have also mapped out hallways to consider traffic flow. It is clear in so doing that it is more challenging, if not impossible, to create space for teachers and students at the secondary level if all students are in school.

4. We are able to cohort students at the PK-5 level, but not at the secondary level. Our elementary classrooms this year will not mix with other students and will not travel very much from their classrooms, the exception being to participate in PE outside or in large spaces. This is not possible at the secondary level due to the complexity of the schedules students take.

5. There are greater educational concerns with Plan B at the elementary level. The CDC and AAP guidelines state that the health risks associated with COVID-19 must be weighed against the adverse impact of not having students attend school physically. A reduction of in-person schooling has a more significant adverse impact on younger children than older children, as well as on students with disabilities and English-language learners. Further, moving to a Plan B format for our elementary students could result in significant childcare problems for families.

For all of these reasons, we are implementing Plan A at the elementary level and Plan B at the secondary level.

PLAN A (Grades PK-5)	PLAN B (Grades 6-12)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● School is open to all students. ● Students will remain with their homeroom class throughout the day. ● School day operates on a two-hour early dismissal schedule. ● Lunch will not be served in school. ● Students qualifying for free and reduced lunch will be provided a packaged lunch just prior to dismissal. ● All parents may order a packaged lunch for their children to be delivered to the classroom just prior to dismissal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All elements of Plan A are in effect, except: ● ~50% of students will attend school one day, ~50% of students will attend the next day. ● Student groups are determined by first initial of last name (A-K, L-Z). ● All students with an I.E.P. may attend school every day. ● All students receiving E.S.L. support may attend school every day.

In Effect for Both PLAN A and PLAN B
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Subsequent to the dismissal of students, there will be about a one-hour period of “down time” for students to return home and eat lunch. ● After the period of down time, there will be another period of time--perhaps 2:05 - 3:05 in grades 1-3 or 1:35 - 2:35 at CHS--for additional virtual work. ● Any parent may opt to place their child on virtual instruction only. ● Students on virtual instruction or on Plan B in grades 6-12 will follow the same schedule as if they were in school, log into the Google Meet, and attend school/class as if they were in school. ● (More details on virtual instruction may be found below) ● Programming for students receiving special education services will be consistent with and determined by their I.E.P.s.

All plans and bullets are subject to change based on changing circumstances or adjustments that might need to be made as we continue to refine procedures or routines. I will try to address a variety of other topics below.

Face Coverings and Other Barriers

Our public health officials have made clear that it is not possible to eliminate all risk from exposure to COVID-19 if schools are open. Therefore, they recommend layering mitigation strategies to reduce risk. The following are measures that we are taking:

- All students are required to wear a face covering when in school, unless they have a documented medical condition or are directed to remove their face covering by a staff member.
- We have purchased face shields for every student also.
- We have purchased desk shields/partitions for desks and student work stations.
- If a student chooses to wear **both a face covering and a face shield**, they will not need to sit at a desk or table with a desk shield.
- If a student chooses to wear **only a face covering**, they will sit at a desk or table with a **desk shield/partition**. At the secondary level, we will ask students who are seated at a desk with a desk shield to use a wipe provided by the district to wipe down the desk shield at the beginning of the period.

Other Mitigation Efforts

We will space student seating as far apart as possible, and we will strive for six feet of space. The reason we are requiring face coverings, however, is that it is not possible in a school setting to guarantee students remain six feet apart. Our classrooms are not large enough to accommodate this and there are moments in a class or school when students will be in proximity to one another and their teacher. There is no way to entirely prevent this. Our public health officials acknowledge this and recommend face coverings, rearranged seating, face or desk shields, and opportunities for handwashing and/or hand sanitizing in order to reduce potential virus transmission.

We will require all parents to attest on a daily basis that their children are fever-free and are not exhibiting other Covid-related symptoms. The CDC [advises against](#) temperature checks on site. We will communicate additional information about the process for doing this as we get closer to the school year.

Most, but not all, classes will be scheduled in rooms with windows. We are in the process of securing MERV-13 air filters for rooms without windows and we are still working on master schedule adjustments. The air conditioning units will run to bring in fresh air, but we will also open all classroom windows and doors to improve air flow and exchange during the school day. This means that classrooms will be warm in August and September and maybe (knock wood!) cool in October. Your child should dress comfortably.

We will not use locker rooms in any school and we will reduce the number of shared and exchanged objects, including books, journals, and other items. However, it is not possible to disinfect every item in a school after every use and it is not possible to avoid all exchanges of materials (such as a teacher needing

to distribute a piece of paper to students). It is important to practice good hand hygiene and allow students to use hand sanitizer and/or wash their hands frequently.

We will limit and control the number of students in hallways by releasing students by location or grade level. Face coverings will be required in hallways because it is not possible to guarantee six feet of distance at all times.

Schools are developing procedures for arrival and dismissal to disperse the student population at each school.

We will reduce or eliminate use of water fountains.

Sanitization

We have stocked up on additional equipment and supplies to more thoroughly and efficiently disinfect classrooms, bathrooms, and other areas. In between the half-day kindergarten and pre-K sessions, classrooms will be sanitized and all classrooms will be sanitized on a daily basis. The additional time after the early dismissal will help in this regard. Again, it is not possible to disinfect every common surface or seating area--whether it is in the high school library or cafeteria in between study halls, the school bus in between runs, or desks throughout the middle and high school--after every single use. We must reinforce good habits in our students and provide them opportunities to wash their hands and use hand sanitizer. Students are welcome to bring sanitizing wipes to school if they would like.

Protocols with Regard to Cases of Covid-19 in a Classroom or School

The CDC and NJDOH have NOT established standard metrics or rules about what to do in the school setting if or when someone tests positive for COVID-19. Their guidance is that we must notify our public health officials and work closely with them in our response. Based on my conversations with our officials, I believe they would zero in on close contacts, defined by those having spent more than 10 minutes within 6 feet of the infected person, and they would not automatically advise that we quarantine a whole class or school with a case of infection. I cannot provide you definitive answers about how each suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 will be handled, but I can tell you that we will follow the direction of the public health officials, as required.

We are in the process of reconfiguring our nurses' offices so that if a student displays symptoms consistent with COVID-19 at school, we have an isolation area. The student will be isolated, away from other students, until released to a parent. We also have secured PPE for our nursing staff so that they may effectively and safely manage students who might have COVID-19.

Moving to Full-Time School or Closing School

The above applies here also. There are currently no standard rules (positivity rate, number of cases, rate of transmission, etc.) that school districts must or could follow to determine to move closer to normal or to shut down. These decisions will be made in concert with local health officials or, in the case of another closure, by the Governor.

Virtual Option

- Whether students are 100% virtual or on Plan B, they will receive instructions on how to join the Google Meet for all of their classes on a daily basis.
- Students will be required to attend the Google Meet as if they were in school, and their attendance will be taken by the teacher.
- Students on virtual instruction will also be required to check in with their teacher(s) each day during a separate Google Meet or other accountability tool. This will likely happen at the end of the school day, during the two-hour window of time created by the early dismissal schedule. This will be in addition to typical homework that may be assigned.
- Students on virtual instruction will still need to take district assessments. This may entail timed assessments while on Google Meet, submittal of photographs to verify student work, and appointments at school after the school day has ended to take district assessments.

I want to try to accurately portray how the streaming of lessons will work. Our teachers are not going to show up in the morning, hit the record button, and have Google Meet streaming for 4.5 hours. Instead, teachers will determine how to most effectively utilize the streaming feature. For example, a teacher might begin class with a mini-lesson on a particular concept. This might comprise 20 minutes of the lesson and it would be streamed live to the students at home. Then she might instruct all of the students to pull up a document, or set of problems, or reading passage, and have students work independently or cooperatively on that task. During this portion of the lesson, the teacher might want to mute the audio and disable the video of the Meet. After 15 minutes of students working and the teacher gauging their work, the teacher might pull all the students back together, turn back on the microphone and camera, and bring the lesson to a close with a discussion that lasts 10 minutes. Other teachers might ask students to watch a video or read something for homework and then use class time to take questions at the Board and have the Meet streaming during the entire lesson. Another teacher might plan for a whole-class set of instructions for only the first five minutes of the class, and then she might work with small groups the rest of the period. While working with small groups, she might have Google Meet on mute and the camera disabled the entire time, except that perhaps she would engage the group of students on the Meet as one other group in the class.

The point is that while having students log in to the Google Meet and view the pertinent portions of the lesson will be a standard practice, the teacher will control the Meet and the teacher will make decisions about what to stream and when, just as teachers make determination about the type of instruction they deliver in their classrooms.

The goal will be to stream only the teacher and the front board. We want to avoid capturing images of students. We do not have professional videographers in our classrooms; we have teachers who are teaching. The Chromebook will be stationary for the most part and our intention will be to stream the portions of the lesson that are teacher-directed. If a teacher needs to hit mute and disable the video to address a behavior or other issue, she will do that as she sees fit.

In addition, parents are not authorized to appear on the Meet with their child, attempt to interfere with a lesson, or record a lesson. Doing so could lead to the suspension of Google Meet or other privileges for

that student. While we recognize that parents may need to assist and support their child, particularly at the younger grade levels, streaming portions of a class lesson depends on cooperation from all parties with the intention of sustaining a healthy and productive classroom environment between teacher and students.

On a parallel note, Google has announced upgrades to Meet which include the ability to take attendance, create smaller break-out groups within the Meet, a mute function for the moderator, and other features that will assist with classroom management. In addition, we will be extending full Gmail and Google accounts to a greater number of students so that using Google Classroom is easier than it was last year.

If you would like to place your child on full virtual instruction, you must [complete this form](#) by FRIDAY, AUGUST 7. If you submit this form, your child will be required to remain on virtual instruction through at least the month of September. If you advise your child's principal that you want your child to return to in-person instruction, the district will enact that change within 30 days of receipt of your request.

Schedules

We are still working on final schedules and building principals will communicate them to you. I do want to address a couple of issues, however. At the K-5 level, we will prioritize ELA and Math instruction during the physical school day. We will run at least one "special" daily, but some subjects, like Science and Social Studies, may be addressed through virtual work or homework. At the 6-12 level, we will maintain the full complement of courses to the greatest extent possible for all students. There are three reasons for this. First, veering away significantly from a master schedule at CMS or CHS will make it much more difficult to return to normal school if we have that opportunity down the road. Second, for some students, the course that most interests them is art . . . or design and technology . . . or Chinese, and relegating some or all of those courses to a mostly or entirely online experience would not be good for many kids. Finally, our curricular program is intentionally designed to provide students in middle school with foundational skills that will enable them to progress to higher levels of coursework in high school. Shortchanging some subjects that are considered "cycles" or "electives" in middle school could undermine a student's ability to take an AP or other high-level class five years from now, when they are in high school and building a transcript.

If Governor Murphy Closes Schools

It is possible that Governor Murphy could announce that schools will not open physically. It is also possible that once we open, schools might close after that. If we are in a position where schools are fully virtual for all students, each school will communicate a virtual schedule to you that will differ from the schedules we are utilizing while schools are open. These schedules will still require students to log on with their teachers via Google Meet at specified times, but they will be different than the schedules in operation while we are in person. There are additional software programs and other resources that our teachers will also utilize if we are fully virtual. Finally, we will provide all students, including those at the K-3 level, with their own Chromebooks if we are fully virtual.

Transportation

If you qualify for district transportation and know that you will not use it for whatever reason, please [complete this form by August 7](#). Thank you very much in advance for doing so, as it could enable us to better space students on our bus routes.

Class Outdoors

Teachers will be encouraged to take their classes outside if possible. Doing so could impact the Google Meet. We have investigated the purchase of tents, shades, and awnings, but they are not a great solution because only large structures provide the amount of space needed for physical distancing and there are some concerns about their stability in wind, rain, etc. If teachers go outside with classes, it will be in a suitable location on school property.

Travel to Another State

If your child travels to another state that has been identified by the State of New Jersey as having elevated levels of COVID-19 transmission, your child must self-quarantine and not come to school until two weeks after returning home. Please contact your child's principal if this situation applies to you. And please be honest about this. As we have seen in professional sports and other places, an outbreak can happen quickly and threaten the good of the whole.

Phases

All of the plans described above will constitute our opening phase of school. We will evaluate all circumstances and conditions in concert with our local health department officials over the month of September. Every 30 days, we will make a determination regarding whether adjustments must be made or we can scale up toward more in-person schooling, which is our ultimate goal. We will regularly communicate these determinations to you.

Preparations

We are one month away from the start of school. It would be very helpful if you could do the following:

- Have your child wear a face covering for longer and longer periods of time.
- Buy a reusable water bottle. We are going to reduce the use of water fountains in the school buildings, so we are asking students to come to school with their own water bottle (already filled).
- Buy hand sanitizer (alcohol-based, no methanol) that your child can bring to school.
- Buy sanitizing wipes if you would like your child to have their own supply.
- Make sure you have a working thermometer and please take the temperature of your child every day once school starts.
- Be flexible--All of the above could change and so could the status of school. We are doing our best to adjust to changing circumstances and we will modify our plans and communicate them as necessary.

We will communicate more information to you in the coming weeks. Some of this will come from me and some it will come from principals, as we continue to work through additional details at each school building. We are also in the process of updating our website with resources for parents and we will share that in the coming weeks. Here are some target dates in terms of release of additional information:

- August 10: We will hold a Board of Education Meeting at 7:30 pm. I will make a presentation that evening that includes more details about our plans, updates on anything that occurs over the next week or so, results from the recent parent surveys, and other information. As has been the case over the past month, a limited number of the public may attend the meeting and the entire meeting will also be streamed live via our website and YouTube channel.
- August 17: We plan to release class lists and open the Parent Portal for school schedules on this date.
- August 24: Final preparations and adjustments for the start of school; another public Board of Education Meeting is also scheduled to take place.

Thank you again for your patience and all of your input. We will keep moving forward together.

Sincerely,

Mike LaSusa