



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS

Office of the Superintendent

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Dear Parent,

Well, we have almost arrived at the start of the 2020/2021 school year. This is usually one of my favorite times of the year (and it still is!), though this year there is a little more anxiety and uncertainty in the air. I write to you below with an update on a variety of subjects.

First, our goal and full intention is to open the school year with the plans already communicated to you. This is Plan A for the elementary schools and Plan B for the secondary schools. However, we are amending the school calendar so that the **first day of school is Tuesday, September 8**. We will make up these days by holding school on November 5 and 6 (Teachers' Convention) and making the final day of the school year June 18 (it was June 15). A resolution reflecting these changes will appear on the Board of Education agenda Monday night.

We are making this change primarily for two reasons:

1. Despite assurances to the contrary, our desk shields have not yet arrived. We expect them by the end of next week. Delaying the start of school will allow us to receive the desk shields and distribute them to classrooms throughout the district. We are also awaiting our face shields for elementary-level students. Even though the face shields are optional, we want to have them prior to the year beginning.
2. We are experiencing a significant number of teacher leaves of absence (more on this below). We are in the process of hiring leave replacement teachers for those staff, but we need the extra week to try to arrive at being fully staffed.

I recognize that the delay to the start of the year will cause problems for some families. The Work-Family Connection has indicated that it can provide childcare to families who need it during the week of August 31 - September 3. I have attached a letter from WFC to this email for those families in need of this service. In addition, the WFC has established childcare programs for Chatham families before and after the school day, as well as during the day for middle school children attending school every other day. Again, you may click on the link in the attachment to learn more about these programs.

2020/2021 Student Health and Safety Rules

As this summer has worn on, the CDC and NJDOH have updated their guidance at different points. We have been modifying our school district policies as a result. I would like to draw your attention to several important rules for our students.

- All students must wear a face covering while at school, unless they have a medical or other condition that would prevent them from doing so. Face masks with vents are prohibited, in accordance with CDC guidance.
- All parents must complete a health screening form EVERY DAY before sending their child to school. This form is found in the Genesis Parent Portal, under the “Forms” tab. If a student arrives at school without having the form completed, the student will be removed from class and isolated until such time that we can reach the parent.
- The New Jersey Department of Health released [new guidance and protocols](#) last week on the reopening of schools and a [new classification system](#) for determining transmission rates. These documents will guide our response to cases in our community and in our schools, with coordination with our local departments of health. Fortunately for Chatham at the present time, transmission rates remain low and schools have the green light to open.

Health Measures

- Buildings have all been cleaned and all HVAC equipment has been run. We have reassigned classes without fresh air exchange and we have purchased MERV-13 filters for spaces without fresh air exchange. We would like to have every classroom window that opens to be open during the school day, with all mechanical systems running simultaneously, and all classroom doors open at all times. This will increase fresh air circulation throughout school buildings. This means the temperature might be higher than we would like in September. Please dress comfortably.
- All classrooms will have a supply of hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes.
- Our custodial staff will sanitize and clean frequently, with a thorough sanitization taking place on at least a daily basis.
- Student seating has been spaced as far apart as possible. The desk shields are a measure the DOH and DOE have authorized as barriers that assist with virus mitigation when 6 feet of distancing is not possible. Desk shields will be distributed throughout the schools as soon as they arrive.

Additional Resources and Updates

Our supervisory team has been working this summer to identify and utilize curricular and instructional resources to bolster virtual learning. We have created a [webpage with these resources](#) and we will continue to update the page as we onboard new programs. We have also created a [page for general reopening information](#), including resources and a video from our school nurses.

Going All Virtual

The [Department of Health guidance document](#) outlines some of the health-related considerations for conversion to all virtual instruction due to COVID-19 cases in a school district. The other dynamic causing other New Jersey school districts to move to virtual instruction right now is staffing. I want to explain what is happening because it could also happen to us.

When the Department of Education and Governor Murphy released [The Road Back](#) guidance document for schools, they made a deliberate decision to shun statewide consistency in favor of maximum flexibility for every individual school district. The predictable and obvious consequence of this, which numerous superintendents raised as a concern at the time and during the month of July, was that there would be no uniformity of school schedules and this would result in significant childcare problems for teachers who reside in school districts electing to implement hybrid student schedules. The DOE and Governor directed school districts to announce their plans and schedules four weeks in advance of the school year, which is exactly what all districts did the first week of August. Predictably, some school districts quickly found that a large number of their teachers needed to take leaves of absence because the schedules of their own children's schools created a childcare dilemma. In response to this reality, the Governor reversed course last Wednesday and announced that districts had a new option available to them: they could begin the year on virtual instruction. The obvious and predictable consequence of this about-face is that, as districts move to this option to start the year, even more teachers have childcare problems because now their home districts are completely closed for in-person instruction.

This has affected us. In July, when surveyed about our preliminary plans for opening, 82% of our teachers indicated that they preferred to open with Plan A and all students in school every day. While we had some teachers in need of accommodations due to underlying health conditions that place them at greater risk of serious illness from COVID-19, the number of staff in this circumstance was manageable. As teachers learned of their home districts' plans in August, however, the number of teachers needing accommodation for childcare problems under the Family First Coronavirus Response Act steadily increased. We are working our way through the leave requests we are experiencing, but the wild card right now is: How many districts will announce that they are starting the year on full virtual instruction over the course of the next week, and how will that impact our teachers? The more districts near Chatham that make this determination, the more likely it is that we will have an unsustainable number of teachers who must take leave because their own children are on full virtual instruction.

I want to make you aware of the above because it is a significant challenge that we, and many other districts, are facing. I also would like to invite any of you who might be interested in serving as a substitute teacher in our schools to consider contacting our [human resources department](#). Thank you in advance for your understanding as we navigate the above and especially if you would like to work in our schools.

Final Thoughts

Nobody has all the answers as to how to operate during the pandemic and none of the answers are good anyway. I am aware that some districts are opening school next week, some districts are not opening at all, and some districts are opening only certain grade levels while having others go virtual. There are pluses and minuses to each approach. In weighing all of the factors, I believe the most prudent course of

action right now is to open our schools, with precautions like universal masking and additional air exchange, in an effort to provide students with an-person learning experience for as long we can.

I also would like to touch on face coverings because I know it is not enjoyable to wear one. I have thought recently about my grandfathers and one of my great uncles. They have all passed, but the greatest societal jolt of their lives was World War II. And the sacrifice they were asked (or told) to make was to enlist (or be drafted), and then be sent to Europe to fight (and possibly be killed by) Nazis. The greatest societal jolt of my life so far is COVID-19, and the sacrifice I am being asked to make is to wear a cotton mask on my face when I go out and am around other people. I am lucky to be 46 years old and not have underlying health conditions. My sacrifice is for other people. And it's not a big ask.

I share this to just say that I know that returning to school is not going to be "fun" in a lot of ways, and instead it is going to involve sacrifices. Parents will have to fill out a form in Genesis every morning, and that is annoying. Students will have to wear a face covering, they will see their teachers in face coverings, everyone will probably be hot and uncomfortable, we might still be working on replacing some of our teachers with full-time replacements, and everything about school will be different. This is not ideal, and our kids will know it is not ideal. We need to focus them, and ourselves, on accepting that we are living in a not ideal time and keeping our sights on all that we can do and enjoy. Not ideal is not perfect, but it is not necessarily bad. The sacrifices we are making will hopefully result in more normalcy, learning, and interpersonal connection.

I look forward to welcoming your children to the new school year in September.

Sincerely,

Michael LaSusa

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