



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS

Office of the Superintendent

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Dear Parent,

Thank you for helping us make it to November with students in school. This has been an unusual and imperfect start to the year, but as we approach the holiday season and colder weather, at least we can say that we have been able to provide a foundation for our students this fall. I am writing to update you on several items.

Outlook Overall

I will start with some potentially good news. You may have seen by this point that there is emerging evidence that schools are not superspreaders of the virus. [This article](#) references data from the U.S. and Europe, and [this one](#) touches on some other studies. To a certain extent, we have experienced this firsthand. The instances of students or adults in our school community testing positive since the school year began have so far not led to wider outbreaks as a result of transmission within the school setting. This hopefully means that the combination of mitigation factors, in particular the use of masks, is helping to avoid outbreaks. This of course is not definitive or fool proof, but at least it is encouraging.

Now for the bad news. As you also surely know, daily COVID cases in New Jersey have more than tripled since the year began, COVID hospitalizations are up by about 150% during that time, and COVID cases and hospitalizations have increased all over the United States and the world as a whole. Chatham is not a bubble and there will likely be many more cases in the coming days, weeks, and months. Apart from the obvious, the reason this is acutely significant to us is that the [current rules](#) from the Department of Health indicate two-week school closures when there are multiple cases in a school community that suggest community transmission (as per the investigation of the local DOH). If the cases continue to climb, it is hard to envision a scenario in which there are not widespread school closures of two-week periods of time or greater.

It is possible that the DOH rules will change or that the cases will head back on a downward trajectory. Absent one of these developments, we should all be prepared to convert to virtual instruction at any moment. We have continued to update the district [Virtual Resources](#) page and we have distributed

additional resources to teachers in preparation for a potential conversion to virtual instruction. We hope that we remain in in-person mode for as long as possible, but we need to be prepared for a shift.

I recognize that many parents would like to see their children return to school full-time. I would like the same. However, moving closer to a normal school day involves more than just whether or not COVID transmits in the school setting. It also involves staffing (we continue to be compromised here), physical space constraints (we have challenges in the current environment), and other variables (like the requirement that we offer all students a virtual program). Given all of these factors and the current surge of cases and hospitalizations in New Jersey, we are not yet planning to move to the next phase of either extending the school day or bringing more students back to school every day. This may change, but for the time being we are remaining in our current model of instruction.

Feedback

We would appreciate it if you would take the time to [complete a survey](#) for each of your children regarding their school experience so far this year. This will help us guide our decision making and adjustments moving forward. Thank you in advance.

Calendar

Our schools are closed on Election Day, both for physical instruction and virtual instruction. The next holiday is Thanksgiving. At the present time, there are no plans to close schools preemptively in the days or weeks after Thanksgiving. Moving schools to virtual instruction involves either consultation with the Department of Health due to COVID cases or a review from the Department of Education based on specific criteria, and the prospect of travel or gatherings on a future date is not one of the approved reasons for school closure.

If you plan to travel out of state with your child for any holiday, your child must then follow the quarantining rules of New Jersey's [travel advisory](#), assuming this advisory is still in effect at the time of travel. Please communicate with your child's school if your child will be unable to attend school due to a quarantine.

The day before Thanksgiving (11/25) and the day before winter break (12/23) are traditionally abbreviated days of school. This year we are already operating on an abbreviated schedule, so the dismissal times of the schools will remain the same as they are now. However, we will hold only a single session of pre-K/kindergarten on each day. The AM session only will take place on 11/23 and the PM session only will take place on 12/23.

Cold and Dress

Staff members will continue to crack their windows to increase the amount of fresh air in our classrooms. Even though the heat is on, our schools will be cooler than usual. Please have your children dress in layers in anticipation of classroom conditions.

Virtual Time

One of the challenges that has emerged among our teachers is the lack of attendance of some students for scheduled virtual sessions. When students are supposed to be logged in with a teacher for an instructional session, but fails to show up, the teacher then has to expend time connecting with that student individually or catching the student up on missed work. This is becoming unsustainable in some situations. Please make sure that your child is attending the scheduled virtual sessions and thank you in advance for assisting us in this way.

Final Thought

I participated in a meeting yesterday with Dr. Maurice Elias, who is a professor of psychology at Rutgers and the director of the Rutgers Center for Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab. A number of his points resonated with me, and I would like to share three of them. First, this pandemic is having an impact on everyone's emotional well-being. None of us is unaffected and we need to acknowledge that we are all experiencing, to varying degrees, feelings of despair, isolation, frustration, and so forth. Second, amidst these emotions, one thing we can do is try to focus on what we can control. Third, and in alignment with these points, we need to give up on expectations or standards that are unreasonable or unrealistic. He spoke specifically about the expectation that our students this year should be at the same point in their learning as students in the past were at this point in the year. Not happening. But if we tend to the emotional needs of our children, then when we return to "normal" life, whenever that may be, our kids will be positioned to make up ground. This year has not been normal and it may get worse. It is as important as ever to focus on the social and emotional needs of students before any presupposed learning standards that may well be faulty in a typical year. As we enter the holiday season and yet more unknown terrain, it is important to keep this in mind.

Thank you again for all of your work in getting us to this point of the year. If you had told me in July that we would make it to November with school in session, I would have signed up for that outcome in a millisecond. We will keep putting one foot in front of the other until we can't anymore. Don't forget to roll the clocks back this weekend and please help your children enjoy a safe Halloween.

Sincerely,

Michael LaSusa