



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS

Office of the Superintendent

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Dear Parent,

What a difference a year makes! One year ago I wrote to inform you that the start of the school year would be delayed by a week because we were still hiring teachers and awaiting the arrival of about 2,000 desk shields. We were launching the year with abbreviated school days and a virtual hour that we had never tried before. We were set to maintain six feet of space between kids at all times, except in the K-5 classrooms, and our 6-12 students would attend school in-person every other day. We needed you to complete a daily health screening form. The list went on and on.

Here we are in 2021 and we are about to start the year with the same school schedules, same extracurricular seasons, and same academic protocols as in September 2019. As of this writing, 81% of our students in grades 7-12 are vaccinated, according to a state immunization registry (the actual percentage is likely higher due to some healthcare providers not belonging to the registry). There are updated rules and requirements regarding virus mitigation, all of which prioritize in-person instruction to the greatest extent possible. In short, we are in a much, much better place now than one year ago. Having said that, we are still in the middle of a pandemic. While our overarching goal remains to ensure that all students attend school in-person as much as possible, we must aim to achieve that goal by keeping students and staff safe and by following all of the rules and requirements of the NJDOH and NJDOE. I am excited by the prospect of a more “normal” year while remaining ready to make changes as needed.

The following is an overview of the key areas of school operations as we begin the year, with an elaboration on certain items after the table. Please recognize that everything below is subject to change based on the evolving directives from state government officials and our local departments of health. This list is also not comprehensive; there will be additional information emanating directly from school buildings or that we will sort out as we adapt to the new school year.

Operational Feature	2020	2021
In-person school day	4.5 hours	6.5 hours
Lunch	No	Yes
Normal use of Art, LMC, Music, and other rooms	No	Yes
Normal science labs	No	Yes
Full school buses	No	Yes
Full extracurricular seasons	No	Yes
All students physically present in school	No	Yes
Parent visitors in schools	No	Yes
In-Person Back-to-School Night	No	Yes
Attend school without completing daily health form	No	Yes
Masks	Yes	Yes
Increased ventilation in classrooms	Yes	Yes

School Day

All schools will follow the “normal” school hours, with detailed schedules available on [our website](#).

- CHS: 7:40 am - 2:35 pm
- CMS: 7:55 am - 2:40 pm
- LAF: 8:45 am - 3:15 pm
- PK-3: 8:35 am - 3:05 pm

COVID Exposure and Quarantine

We will follow all rules set by the New Jersey Department of Health for contact tracing and quarantining. As of today, fully vaccinated individuals do NOT need to quarantine if they are exposed to a COVID-positive individual so long as they remain asymptomatic. Given our high rate of vaccination in students ages 12 and up, this fact will dramatically shrink the number of quarantines at CMS and CHS.

Next, as per the [CDC update on July 9](#), in instances of a positive case in the classroom setting, if all individuals have been spaced at least three feet apart from one another AND all are wearing masks, then the individuals exposed to the positive case do NOT need to quarantine. While the NJDOH has not yet released its guidance for the coming school year, the anticipation is that the NJDOH will follow the CDC and adopt this rule change. This, too, will lead to a reduction in quarantines at all schools.

Masks

Governor Murphy issued [Executive Order 251](#) earlier this month. Masks must be worn in all indoor spaces within the district. We will require masking in all indoor spaces as we begin the year and hope that as conditions improve we will gain more flexibility regarding masking, especially given our very high vaccination rates. Please ensure that your children have a mask with them as they are dropped off at school. Our students were absolutely magnificent when it came to wearing masks last year. If the aforementioned CDC rule is adopted as expected, this year universal masking eliminates the need to quarantine due to exposure in the classroom setting. Masks will NOT be required in outdoor settings, which include recess, outdoor physical education classes, and outdoor extracurricular events..

I know there are strong feelings regarding masks and that some parents might wish that the school district would defy the Governor's Executive Order. Doing so would risk serious consequences for the school official involved and potentially for the district at large. According to N.J.S.A. App. A: 9-49, an individual who knowingly defies an order of the Governor "shall be adjudged a disorderly person and shall be subject to imprisonment for a term not to exceed 6 months or shall pay a fine not to exceed \$1,000.00 or to both a fine and imprisonment, in the discretion of the court." In addition, according to the Board's law firm, Cleary, Giacobbe, Alfieri & Jacobs, "if the Board implements policies or procedures in violation of Executive Order No. 251, the School District could face additional consequences, including: penalties and/or loss of State aid, OSHA and PEOSH complaints, ethics charges, and litigation, among other things." In short, just like last year, we will follow the rules set for us by the state and work within those rules to provide the best possible educational experience for students.

Health Screening

Unlike last year, we are asking all parents to complete a single attestation at the beginning of the year to indicate that they will monitor their children for symptoms on a daily basis and not send a child who is sick to school. This form is available in the Genesis Parent Portal and needs to be completed only one time prior to the start of the year. Most of you will have already completed this form when you accessed the parent portal to view your child's schedule last week.

Lunch

Lunch will take place at all schools. At the K-5 level, we will make an effort to space students apart at lunch to the greatest extent possible, and we will utilize spaces beyond the cafeteria. Staff members may bring students to the gym, all-purpose room, or outdoors for a "picnic-style" lunch. At CMS and CHS, we have too high a volume of students to do this, but we will permit fewer students at each table than in the past so that we avoid squeezing students shoulder-to-shoulder at tables. In all schools, we will have additional spaces available for students who may need special accommodations based on their health needs. Please contact your child's school nurse or counselor if your child needs special accommodations.

Transportation

School buses will operate as normal this year. Due to contact tracing requirements, we will attempt to track where on a bus a student is seated. Masks are required on all school buses at all times.

Parent Visitors in School

Parents will be permitted in schools as normal, but will be required to wear a mask. We recognize that some parents might prefer the convenience of a virtual meeting in lieu of an in-person meeting to discuss something, so we may continue to utilize Google Meet when all parties find that to be more convenient.

Back-to-School Night

At the present time, we are planning for in-person Back-to-School Nights. However, there are a couple of caveats. If you have attended a BTSN before, you know that our schools are packed. If there are 20 students in a particular class, it is not uncommon for 35-40 parents to cram into that classroom on BTSN. We would like to avoid that scenario this year. Therefore, our teachers will create the same kinds of video presentations they did last year to provide an overview of their classes and courses. We are requesting that you consider viewing the video presentation IN LIEU of attending BTSN. If you would prefer to attend BTSN in person, we request that wherever possible only one parent per child attend the event. Should our plans around BTSN change, your child's school will notify you.

Remote Instruction

As per the directives and [guidance document](#) from the Department of Education, we will provide remote access to classroom instruction for any student testing positive for COVID or for any student who must quarantine as a result of exposure at school. In these isolated instances, we will begin the remote instruction a full school day after being notified of the diagnosis or exposure in order to enable our teachers to set up and prepare the remote access. The livestream will be available to the student in this situation for viewing only; the teacher will not incorporate the student into lessons like they did last year.

Remote access to instruction will NOT be available on a daily or ongoing basis for other circumstances. Running a hybrid classroom diminishes the learning experience inside the classroom by diverting the attention and demands of the teacher away from the students present and toward the Chromebook at the front of the room. It is important to return students to a sense of normalcy in terms of classroom routines and in-person interaction. In order to ensure the best learning experience possible within the classroom, we want to minimize the amount of remote instruction taking place.

Assemblies and Field Trips

At the start of the year, we will not be holding indoor assemblies at the PK-6 grade levels, as these grade levels contain our population of students not yet eligible for vaccination. In grades 7-12, we will permit assemblies as needed. We will schedule most field trips for the second half of the year.

Paper versus Reality

On paper, the above looks pretty good! Notwithstanding the prospect of changes based on the conditions, it is important to remember that our students will face a significant transition back toward "normal." The adjustment between a summer schedule and full school day will prove exhausting for some. Being back in a school filled to capacity may be overwhelming for others. It will take time to build up an endurance and sense of comfort in being in school all day long with all classmates present. Our counseling staff stands ready to support students who may struggle with the re-entry and we ask that you be proactive in reaching out for help if you think your child needs it. We initiated a teletherapy program last spring and

continued it into the summer for students who benefitted from it. We will continue to provide that program and others if it is helpful for the mental well-being of our students.

Final Note

The past 20 months have been difficult and we all want a complete resumption of normal. I am tired of wearing a mask all day and devoting most of my time to pandemic and crisis management. When I am frustrated or impatient, I try to gain perspective. I have frequently thought about one of our colleagues, Brian Erb, over this past year. Brian is a teacher at CHS. He majored in pre-med at Middlebury College, but opted to go into teaching after graduating. Due to his academic background, he holds certifications in three areas: biology, physical science, and special education. Prior to Chatham, Brian worked at Lehman High School in the Bronx, a school with which I am familiar because my uncle spent nearly 30 years there as a social studies teacher.

Last fall, one of Brian's twin daughters, Jackie, was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer called juvenile myelomonocytic leukemia. This upended the Erb family. Just a couple of months later, Jackie's twin sister, Addi, received the same diagnosis. They are five years old. 2021 has been a year of living at CHOP, dealing with medical emergencies and procedures--including the bone marrow donation that Brian's wife, Lauren, provided for her daughters--navigating treatments and insurance processes, and trying to care for the twins' older sister, Olivia, back in Summit while the rest of the family is in Philly. The list goes on and on.

Every time I speak or email with Brian, he is upbeat and optimistic. His training in science enables him to understand exactly what is going on. He had to take a leave of absence for the second half of last year, but is aiming to return to CHS in the very near future. He still is putting one foot in front of the other and focusing on all of the progress his girls are making. He writes to me about their completion of certain treatments, their recovery from tangential procedures and conditions, and the moments they get away from the hospital, when they can be kids again. He is grateful and looking ahead.

Drawing some inspiration from him, I am looking at the 2021/2022 school year through the prism of progress and perspective. We have made huge strides from a year ago. The mechanical features of the school day will return to normal on August 30. There are a couple of more milestones I hope we reach within a few months, such as the elimination of certain contact tracing protocols and no longer needing to wear a mask. But there is plenty to look forward to before we get there. Football games and marching band performances with spectators will return soon. Students will be in school all day. Their learning will be centered within the classroom and not split in two by a livestream. They will laugh and make a mess at lunch. It will be exciting and new and tiring, as September should be.

I love everything about the start of school, and this year is no different. Thank you for helping us make the progress we have so far and for your ongoing flexibility and support as we move forward together.

Sincerely,
Michael LaSusa