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Include, Inspire, Empower

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Dear Families;

I hope this message finds you and your loved ones well and that you are enjoying a safe and relaxing summer.

Even as we celebrate the graduation of the class of 2020, we are already deeply involved in planning for the 2020-2021 school year. While students were still in remote learning, district administrators, working in partnership with the BHEA, created the following committees: Special Education, Governance, Operations, Curriculum/Instruction and Remediation, Athletics, Technology, Facilities, Health and Social Emotional Learning, Finance, and Transportation. It is a testament to the quality of our staff that so many of our teachers, nurses, counselors, and CST members have volunteered their time to help the district create this plan. I want to make sure I give them a huge shout out. Thank you!

This preparation allowed the district to have an organizational structure in place and begin conversations about all of the challenges associated with the 2020-2021 school year. As a result, when the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) released its 104 page guidance for the reopening of schools: [The Road Back: Restart and Recovery Plan for Education](#) on June 26, we were in an excellent position to distill this large volume of information and interpret its meaning for our district.

GUIDANCE RECEIVED

Given that the NJDOE guidance was drafted for every district in the state, and that the pandemic is a still evolving event, [The Road Back](#) generated more questions than answers. But it did provide important clarification for two central issues:

- School is reopening in the fall for in-person education.
- All students will be required to wear a face covering (mask which covers nose and mouth) when physical distancing of 6 feet is not possible. Students with documented medical conditions that impact mask wearing being the only exception.

Shortly after the NJDOE published its guidance the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) (AAP) also published guidelines for opening schools. Please take the time to read them through the embedded link. This organization, albeit apart from the NJDOE, is a valuable resource that informs our best practices and reopening strategies. I have long consulted the AAP for guidance on issues affecting students, including substance use, sleep needs, and screen time, and have come to rely on this organization's insights. The AAP's guidance on school reopening in the Fall includes:

- "All policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school."
- The negative implications and consequences of not having students in school every day must be weighed against the current evidence about how Covid-19 affects school-aged children.
- Schools should consider a physical distancing standard for pupils of 3 feet, with face coverings, as feasible, which is the same standard set by the World Health Organization.
- The needs of students receiving special education programming demand the utmost priority and must be weighed alongside any virus mitigation measures.

BHPS INITIAL PLANS

There are three important considerations that are shaping our decision making process: the guidance that we receive from the state and medical authorities; the physical and emotional well-being of our staff and students; and delivering high quality, rigorous, and highly effective instruction to all of our students. Also informing our strategy is the recent parent survey regarding virtual learning that indicated that 85% of parents intend to send their children to school in the Fall. **Balancing all of these considerations, our primary goal for the 2020-2021 school year is to have all students be in school, in-person as much as possible.**

To that end, we are developing a full plan that we will share with you by the end of this month. However, in order to provide you with as much time as possible to make arrangements and prepare for the coming year, I want to share with you now some basic information on the format and structure of our initial reopening plan. Please note that this is a bare bones outline and that we are very early in this process. There are many factors, most of which are beyond our control that might force changes to any and all aspects of the information that I am sharing. Also, the entire final plan is subject to additional input and approval from the local Departments of Health and the Department of Education.

The most important elements of our plan for you to be aware of include:

- Schools will be open to all students every day, on a modified schedule.
- The modified schedule will include roughly a four hour day. (Exact structure and timing TBD. For example, we are considering early dismissals for some of our schools and later start times in others.)
- A lunch period/time will not be part of the schedule.
- Parents may opt to have their children remain on virtual instruction. (Specific guidelines to follow).
- Special Education programming will be based on each child's IEP and may entail supplemental and extended programming.

We recognize that an early dismissal/late start schedule is a hardship for some families. But, that is also why we are giving as much advanced notification as possible. In addition, I will be reaching out to Primrose and to the YMCA to see if we can work in collaboration with them for child care issues.

The decision to modify the schedule to a four hour day was not taken lightly. We feel it balances the need to get students back in school to receive high quality in-person instruction with health and safety concerns. This schedule will minimize higher-risk exposure moments like passing time and, in particular, lunch. The early dismissal will also provide much needed additional time to sanitize school buildings on a daily basis. Finally, teachers will supplement in-person instruction with remote instructional support while students are not in building.

All schools operate a wide variety of instructional settings and combinations including large but not limited to classroom spaces of various square footage and layout, science labs, industrial and fine art spaces, and small group instruction. The wide variety of combinations across levels and buildings significantly impact our operations under Covid-19 restrictions. We will be implementing additional physical spacing measures in classrooms and hallways, and other common spaces. Additionally, we will build in additional time during the day for handwashing, age level appropriate mask 'breaks' and snack times, and other measures. However, although we will strive to create 3-6 feet of social distancing space whenever possible, unless a student has a documented medical condition that precludes the use of face coverings, **all students and staff are required wear masks in the buildings or on a bus at all times.**

In addition to being masked while on a bus, transportation presents a variety of other safety challenges. Therefore, we will only bus students who live over 2 miles away from our PK-8 buildings and those who live over 2.5 miles away from Governor Livingston High School. This means that when schools open this Fall, the district will not offer subscription or courtesy busing (free busing to Mary Kay McMillin). Again we acknowledge that this might create additional hardship for some families. On all bus routes we will seek to maintain as much distance as possible, but the limitations of space and the volume of students will likely mean that 3-6 feet of space may not be possible. **Again, students will be required to wear masks on the bus at all times.**

We are required to develop a policy regarding daily health screenings for all students. We are working through the particulars of this, and will communicate them with you by the end of the month. However, you should be aware that this will likely involve parents confirming - each day - that their child is free from all symptoms of illness - including fever. My advice is to make sure that you have a reliable thermometer at home. As they have been in short supply, you might want to consider looking to purchase one now.

Because of the dynamic nature of the Covid pandemic and the oversight/approval of the DOE and health department, it is entirely possible that we will not be able to implement our primary plan. In that case, we are also developing other plans that would rotate cohorts of students in and out of the school building on an alternating daily or weekly basis. This would be done to reduce the number of students in the building at any given moment. In these scenarios we would look to implement some form of live-stream instruction that students would have to log into from home, when their cohort is not in-building. While these scenarios allow for more social distancing, they are also significantly more disruptive to student learning and family life, to say nothing of the associated increase in cost of implementation. It is also likely in this scenario certain kinds of special education programming will remain in-person every day.

Finally, please be aware that it is entirely possible, that we will have to return to virtual instruction during the 2020-2021 academic year. We are planning for multiple contingencies, ranging from a shorter quarantine period of 14 days, to this past year's extended multi-months remote learning model.

I would like to emphasize, again, that all of our plans depend heavily on the guidance, input, direction and ultimately approval of the NJ DOE and the local department of health.

WHAT CAN I DO TO PREPARE?

We do understand the hardships involved for all students, staff, and families, for anything less than 100% return to school. In addition to making plans for any child care needs and transportation these are some of the other steps you can take to prepare for return to school in 2020-2021.

- Purchase a thermometer.
- Purchase several well fitted, comfortable, washable cloth face masks. Your child will need a clean face mask daily.
- Develop Mask 'endurance' - start training your child now to wear their masks for extended periods of time. We all know that this can be uncomfortable and annoying. However, it is also one of the most important steps we can take for everyone's safety. The more you and your child wear their masks, the more comfortable they will be wearing them for extended periods.
- Purchase any personal supplies of alcohol based hand sanitizer and/or disinfectant wipes that your child can carry to school.
- Purchase any other items that will help your child feel safe and comfortable returning to school.

- Talk to your child about good health and safety routines, but also emphasize a positive message. People who wear masks and follow other guidelines like social distancing and handwashing are making themselves and those around them safer. Try to balance the seriousness of the message with the idea that they are also safe.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this letter, I know that there is a lot here to digest, and much of it is in the early stages of planning. However, I felt that it was important to provide you with a sense of our direction so that you too may begin to plan for the Fall. The district's full plan will address many other topics including more information about school routines, instruction and assessment, curricular considerations, remediation strategies, technological support, health and safety routines, and much, much more. We hope to have this to you by the first week in August. I realize that even though this is long and arduous, I realize it may give you more questions than answers. The Board of Education will meet on July 30th at 7:30 PM to discuss the detailed plan.

Thank you so much for your ongoing support and understanding.

Sincerely,

Dr. Melissa Varley, Superintendent of Schools