



HOLMDEL TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS

July 17, 2020

Dear Holmdel School District Community,

With just 10 weeks to the start of our 2020-21 school year, our entire nation is grappling with the question of how and when to safely send our children back to our schools. In this letter, I am providing you with our most recent update.

Before getting into our update, I think it is worth noting that we are in an unprecedented time that literally breaks down our usual process for change. Changes of the magnitude that we faced in March, and now again in September, usually take about two years to develop and implement and involve a review of research, direct staff input, surveys, modeling, piloting, and training for staff. Because of the directive from the State to reopen in September, we do not have the opportunity to follow the normal process. The State directive is not unreasonable since schools are vital to our children, our community, and our nation, and they need to be opened as soon as it is safe. Unfortunately, to meet the established deadline, we are going to be rushed, and in my experience, when we rush, some people are unhappy that the process was rushed and not more inclusive. This is completely understandable and please know that we are seeking involvement to the greatest degree possible under this very limited and restrictive directive.

As educators in our school district, we are trying to read and understand all of the rapidly changing and sometimes conflicting information available for schools for reopening this fall. We are collaborating with other school districts and brainstorming daily on the wide variety of challenges and solutions being considered for reopening all of our schools. We are trying to wade through the politics that have consumed this topic and trying to get to the science behind supporting the reopening and providing our students and staff with a safe learning environment. This is challenging due to the contradicting information we are receiving and the ever-changing spread of the Covid 19 virus. To ensure we are making the best decisions for our students and staff, we are constantly seeking clarification and support from state health officials, the Department of Education through weekly meetings with the Monmouth County Office of Education and superintendents in Monmouth County.

Here is our latest update.

As per current State guidelines, we are considering a reopening plan using the 6 feet social distancing model, as recommended by State health officials and national organizations. This model prevents us from being able to bring all students back to our buildings, five days a week, for full days. Maintaining 6 feet between desks reduces the capacity to about 50% and forces us to consider a hybrid schedule (e.g. half the students in one day, half in on another, etc.) The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a report saying

the benefits of sending children back to school this fall generally outweighs the risks but then clarified its position a few days later, saying that's only if CDC procedures (6 feet spacing) are in place, and the area is experiencing low infection rates. This last sentence is critical to our planning and maintaining a school environment that is safe for all students and staff. Currently, our plan also strongly considers the use of masks by all students and staff as mandated by the NJ Department of Health, new cleaning and mitigation procedures, modifications to our lighting (UVL) and air circulation systems (see press release), social distancing and masks on buses (more clarification to come), and keeping students in cohort groups as much as possible throughout the school day.

As stated, we are examining an in-person "hybrid" model for the fall that would reduce our student capacity by 50% and allow for a full 6 feet of distancing between desks. As cases across the country are rising, many officials are urging schools to examine all options, including hybrids. We would be foolish not to do so, as we don't know what the coming weeks will bring. So as not to cause rumors, I wanted to let everyone know that this is something we are examining. No decision has been made at this time, but we must submit our reopening plan to the State by August 14, 2020.

While we are considering these and other actions, our current situation begs the question; will it be enough? This is the question that I am increasingly receiving from all of our community stakeholders and one I am also asking myself. More than anything, I'd like my own grandchildren to be back in school this fall. I also want them to be healthy and safe just like I want all of our students and staff to be healthy and safe. Our goal still remains to open our schools as safely as possible for everyone. Unfortunately, changing conditions and the fact that not one national organization seems to be certain what it will take to do that, makes the decision difficult.

We have begun testing an instructional technology model for remote learning using our current technology in an attempt to improve the quality of our streaming. This point is critical since we are finding the supply chain for new and more technology is very limited and we do not believe we could purchase adequate new technology equipment at this time for the entire staff and all students nor provide adequate training. The model is simply a streaming approach for the elementary, middle, and high school levels that would allow us to have half of our students in a classroom at 6 feet separation and half at home connected via zoom or Google meeting. This was only a test to see how our existing technology might work. Absolutely no decisions have been made. We will also continue to research numerous hybrid models and scenarios in case we need to move in this direction. None of these scenarios are ideal, but in a year that has already brought so many unexpected turns, we feel we have to try to be as prepared as possible for what may come.

We are addressing the District's transportation needs and planning as necessary. It is important to note that we have already awarded all of the necessary busing contracts to fully support all student transportation needs for the 2020-2021 school year.

I completely understand the anxiety that any kind of hybrid model causes for parents and staff who may struggle with child care. I also understand the anxiety from students, staff, and parents who have told me they are concerned for their safety and that of their families. Please rest assured that any decisions we make will include parent and staff input garnered from the surveys you completed and reopen committees composed of staff, parents and administrators. On a side note, your willingness to complete the surveys was greatly appreciated and resulted in over 2,100 parent responses!

While student schedules have not been set, the District is considering a schedule having students attending every other day or a variation of that or set days twice per week with one day a week being a virtual day for all students. We are also discussing half day and full day scheduling options at this time. For our most at-risk students, we are considering daily attendance. Again, no decision has been made at this time but these scenarios are being considered.

Every day brings a new report, new data, and new guidance. I believe that in the next few weeks, we will be able to move collectively closer to a path of safe and healthy reopening. Thank you in advance for the patience and for your support and understanding of the complexity of these decisions and the process we must go through this summer. We really do want to make the best possible choices for our students, their parents, staff, and community.

Sincerely,

Dr. Lee Seitz

Acting Superintendent of Schools