

# ONTEORA CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

BOICEVILLE, NEW YORK 12412

**Victoria McLaren**  
Superintendent of Schools

(845) 657-6383  
Fax (845) 657-8742

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Dear Onteora Families,

I want to welcome you back to school for the 2020-2021 school year. This school year will continue to present challenges, but I appreciate your patience and support for the District as we move forward through this situation. I have seen incredible creativity, dedication and kindness from our administrators, faculty and staff and I know that we all appreciate your patience and dedication. We all want to make this the best possible year for all of our students.

I had been in the habit of providing everyone with updates related to our Board of Education meetings, and in the adjustment to the pandemic, I let this practice go. As the new school year starts, I believe that it is important to resume this practice, especially with the Board meetings remaining virtual.

Our Board will meet this Tuesday at 7pm. The link can be found on the website. Throughout the summer, the Board has received regular updates from Mike DeLima of BBL Construction on the status of the capital improvements. There has been a lot of important work done to improve our facilities for our students, staff and community. Mr. DeLima will be presenting at this meeting, as well.

In light of the events happening in our country, our Board is creating an anti-racism resolution to clearly state our District's intolerance of racism, bigotry and hate. The resolution will define our commitment to analyzing our policies and practices to address issues of racism, bigotry and hate within our school community. The Board began this important work at our last meeting, and they plan to continue this work at tomorrow's meeting.

Our School Resource Officer (SRO) will be addressing the Board at this meeting to provide a presentation on the SRO program and the role of the SRO in our district. Our Board approved the contract for our SRO program to continue in the current school year at a previous meeting, but asked for more information related to the role of the SRO in our school district.

Another important issue that will be discussed at this meeting is athletics during the pandemic. The Governor approved sports to begin, and then various sections across the state have determined the date that they would begin each season. There is no consistency across the state in this regard, with some sections having immediately begun sports, and several sections deciding to delay the start of sports until January of 2021. The section that we belong to, Section IX, has determined that our sports seasons will start on November 30th, and that on September 21, 2020, off-season workouts may begin with approval by each local school district. Participation is determined by each individual district.

As you all know, all districts in New York State were required to create a reopening plan that included many required safety components that were created to protect our entire school community. Some of these required components include:

The district must implement, and enforce social distancing (6 feet of separation) in all school facilities and on school grounds, including transportation;  
Ensure that a distance of twelve feet in all directions is maintained between individuals while participating in aerobic activity;  
Ensure that student groupings are as static as possible by having the same group/cohort of students stay together;  
Turn desks (including teachers) to face in the same direction rather than facing each other to reduce transmission caused by virus-containing droplets (e.g., from talking, coughing, sneezing);  
Explore the use of alternate spaces (e.g., classroom) for eating lunch and breakfast. If alternate spaces are not available, ensure classroom groups are together in lunchrooms while adhering to the social distancing rules;  
Limit gathering in small spaces (e.g., elevators, faculty offices) by more than one individual at a time, unless all individuals in such space are wearing acceptable face coverings;  
Playgrounds may continue to be used when proper safeguards are in place. In elementary school settings, consider staggering playground use rather than allowing multiple classes to play together. Limit other activities where multiple groups interact;  
Cancel/limit student assemblies, athletic events/practices, performances, school-wide parent meetings. Consider transitioning field trips to free virtual opportunities. Consider changing in-school events to a virtual format

I have been questioning the Governor's approval for sports to begin since hearing the announcement. Despite the restrictions placed upon our staff and students during the day, according to the New York State Public High School Athletics Association (NYSPHAA) "Return To Interscholastic Athletics" guidance document, athletes would not follow the same guidelines during sports as are required during the day. During athletics, individuals must maintain a distance of at least six feet among individuals, at all times, unless safety or the core activity (e.g. practice, playing) requires a shorter distance. If a shorter distance is required, individuals must wear face coverings, unless players are unable to tolerate a face covering for the physical activity. This is completely counter to the requirement that students engaging in aerobic activity during the school day must maintain a social distance of twelve feet from each other. There is no explanation for this contradiction or what scientific data was used to create these guidelines that are so different from the guidelines schools are required to follow during the day.

Once our students return to school, our secondary students will be attending in cohorts of 25% of the student body, one day per week, with no students on campus at the MS/HS on Wednesdays. The guidance for the academic day requires us to maintain students in cohorts as much as possible. This has created additional scheduling constraints as we can no longer combine classes at the elementary level for specials such as music, art, and physical education class. Obviously, after school athletics would require combined cohorts thereby reducing the effectiveness of our work during the day.

According to the guidance provided by the NYSPHAA, there is no requirement for districts to transport students to school on a day that they are not attending in person for extra-curricular activities or athletics. We are unable to provide transportation for those students not in school on a particular day to come to school after the academic day. This is likely to provide hardship for families and inequity of opportunity for students.

Our student athletes are understandably anxious and excited to resume participation in sports and many families have reached out to me to voice their support for the resumption of the athletic program.

Certainly everyone involved with children recognizes the importance of physical activity and the skills

and life lessons learned through athletics. Having competed at the collegiate level in swimming, I understand the personal growth that comes with the experience of sports. We all know that sports can be a door into opportunities that might not otherwise be available to some of our students.

Many families across the state have taken up the phrase “Let Them Play,” which brings this issue to a simple yes or no. There is nothing simple about this situation, and it cannot be reduced to a simple yes or no for anyone that feels a responsibility to protect the health and safety of everyone involved.

Unfortunately, we have all seen examples of how quickly this virus can spread, most recently with the closure of SUNY Oneonta after experiencing an outbreak of 665 cases. This situation forced the college to send all students home and resume instruction fully remotely within weeks of the fall semester beginning. Equally unfortunate is the fact that this is not an isolated situation. We look forward to welcoming our students back into our buildings, utilizing the guidelines we have been given, and working to minimize the impact of infections within our buildings, which would lead to closures of classrooms or entire buildings. We will be complying with the guidelines that have been given to us, knowing that this virus has the potential to place our students, faculty and staff at risk as well as our entire school community. Our infection rates locally are low right now, but we have all heard the message that with the fall and winter coming, people will inherently be spending more time indoors, which leads to a much more dangerous situation with an airborne virus. We are learning more about this virus every day. There are new findings showing that the virus attacks the brain in some cases, which can lead to debilitating neurological issues, and there is evidence showing that although it has been thought that young adults are not as affected by this virus, a study detailed in a research letter from Harvard shows that this virus is life-threatening for people of all ages.

Our state has failed our schools by providing contradictory guidance with no explanation and placing schools in a position to make decisions that have the potential to negatively impact the entire school community in an attempt to support our student athletes. This situation is unnecessarily divisive. We all want to support our students in every way possible. I continue to question how there can be two sets of rules to follow within the same day. If one set of guidelines was developed to create a safe environment, it should be consistent for everyone. Sports should not have been approved to proceed under these conditions and I am not in favor of starting off-season conditioning and practices on September 21st. Once students return to school, and we take the time to understand the impact of bringing large groups of children together, I will consider whether it is in the best interest of our school community to resume athletics and what the guidelines should be for that to be done safely.

Sincerely,

Victoria McLaren  
Superintendent of Schools