

Springfield Public Schools

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August 17, 2020

Dear Springfield Students, Families, Staff, and Community Members:

When I joined the Springfield Public Schools, I made a commitment to increase the transparency of district decision making. Throughout the process of planning our return to school, we have made a concerted effort to include community members and staff in the planning process. In order to continue this commitment, I am writing to share with you that two recommendations are being made to the Board of Education this evening. First, we are presenting a revised calendar for the 2020-2021 school year to add professional development days for our staff. Second, we are requesting the Board authorize the district to revise the Springfield 2020: Reopening Our Schools Plan, to begin the school year using a virtual-only learning model.

On Thursday, August 13, 2020, two critical pieces of communication were shared by state agencies. First, Governor Murphy's [Executive Order No. 175](#) clarified requirements for opening schools. Second, the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) published the "[COVID-19 Public Health Recommendations for Local Health Departments for K-12 Schools](#)," providing additional guidance regarding contact tracing and district responses to positive cases of COVID-19. Together, these pieces of guidance are impacting how we evaluate our ability to offer a high-quality hybrid learning experience.

As we continue to work through the plans to operationalize our plan for opening schools, we are identifying critical challenges to a successful implementation of both models of hybrid in-person learning including:

- Changes in guidance from health authorities regarding the contact tracing process;
- Increased numbers of staff members who will not be able to support in-person instruction due to critical health issues; and
- Finalizing planned infrastructure changes.

First, the changes and updates in guidance from the NJDOH has significant impacts on planning and preparing for the health and safety of our students. The document notes the following:

- "Signs and symptoms of COVID-19 in children may be similar to those of common viral respiratory infections or other childhood illnesses" (p. 10).
- "There is not a single symptom that is uniquely predictive of a COVID-19 diagnosis" (p. 10).
- Based on the "[regional risk matrix](#)" available on August 17, 2020, Union County is at a "Moderate" risk, indicating students with multiple symptoms (i.e. headache and cough) should be excluded from school following the "Exclusion Table" (p.12-13).
- "Closure is a local decision that should be made by school administrators in consultation with local public health" (p. 15).

Rachel Goldberg, Superintendent of Schools

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In addition, the document provides a variety of scenarios, directing districts that “students and staff in close contact with a positive case are excluded from school for 14 days” (p. 15). While the district is challenged by the anxiety of COVID-19, we will also face a new influenza season, further stretching our schools’ ability to respond to students and staff who present symptoms.

Second, the district continues to collect information about two important metrics to inform our next steps toward implementing the hybrid model: anticipated student participation in hybrid and virtual learning and staffing in-person instruction. As of this afternoon, approximately 60% of our students have responded to the OnCourse question, and of those who responded, 40% have chosen virtual instruction. Currently, 60% of our staff members have submitted requests for accommodations based on a range of indicators, and 26% are requesting accommodations specifically related to at-risk indicators including age and serious medical conditions. It has become clear that offering the in-person hybrid would require significant shifts of teachers across schools and grade levels, ultimately at the expense of a stronger learning experience, whether virtual or in-person.

Third, the district is working to finalize critical infrastructure changes necessary to meet the requirements set by the State. As of last week, the district has received the hand sanitizer machines ordered earlier in the summer and the facilities team will continue installation in every classroom in the district. This week, new fresh air window vents are arriving and installation will begin this week to fit them into over 70 classrooms with identified window-related challenges. Finally, we are using the OnCourse program to support the daily health questionnaire deployment. While the program has been created, the district must provide adequate training to our staff and our families prior to in-person instruction resuming to ensure the appropriate protocols are followed.

Fourth, the district is committed to significantly improving the virtual learning experience for all of our students and providing high-quality instruction and student support. To accomplish this, we have worked with the Springfield Education Association to add professional development days at the start of the year, and include ongoing learning throughout the year. We are working to provide this experience in the following ways:

- Teachers will be expected to provide in-person real-time instruction throughout the day, with a clear schedule for students and families. Examples of such schedules are available in the Springfield 2020: Reopening Our Schools Plan and the online presentations provided to the Board of Education.
- The district is in the process of adding the Google Apps for Education (GAFE) Suite, to provide critical tools necessary for teacher and student collaboration.
- All teachers are expected to fully utilize OnCourse to support active communication with students and parents.
- Staff will be evaluated as specified in state and district policies on their instruction through observations of virtual classrooms.
- Staff will be required to include social-emotional learning (SEL) supports throughout their instruction.

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- Guidance counselors will be required to meet with students on a regular basis to support the SEL framework, and in the high school, provide ongoing college planning and application support.
- We will be asking for feedback from our families, and will continue to use that feedback to strengthen our programs and services.

As a result of these considerations, the district will be revising the district plan to begin the school year as a virtual only model for the first part of the school year. The timeline to implement the Springfield 2020: Reopening Our Schools will shift to the following:

- September 8-9, 2020: 2 Additional Days of Professional Development for Staff relating to virtual instruction
- September 10, 2020: Full District Virtual Instruction Begins
- On or before October 19, 2020: The district will present the district status of proceeding with the reopening plan. In grades K-12, this will be a two-day “A/B” model.
- Week of November 2, 2020: If the district is able to move forward, students in grades K-6 will begin in-person learning opportunities.
- November 17, 2020: If the district is able to move forward, students in grades 7-12 will begin Marking Period 2 with in-person learning opportunities.

This revised approach provides essential time for staff, students, and families to adapt to a stronger and more structured virtual learning model, and allows the district time to finalize facility updates and test screening protocols necessary to welcome students to in-person instruction. Ultimately, any decisions to move forward with the plan will be made based on guidance from the NJDOH, NJDOE, and local health officials.

While considering the new guidance, we are hearing from our parents and staff who have shared concerns such as: students struggled to have meaningful learning during the Spring; families are juggling work requirements; teachers are concerned for the academic well-being for students; families of students with extended health concerns; certified staff members with critical health issues that have kept them in their homes for the past months; and students want to return to school but share the anxiety for their teachers and families. As a district, the ongoing shifts in guidance are placing a considerable strain on our ability to fully plan and implement a successful return to school.

In each of our presentations, we have begun the discussion of the plan noting the priority we place on the health and safety of our students, staff, and community. We will not waver in that commitment, while we are mindful of the tremendous task of supporting student learning that lies ahead. We recognize the enormous challenge that lies ahead for our families and our community and while we understand that this decision may disappoint many of our families, please know that we are working hard to provide the best experience possible in the coming month(s).

As we have presented the plan, and its ongoing revisions, the community’s feedback has been critical. I sincerely appreciate the more than 300 community members that provided feedback

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online, and the more than 200 parents, staff, and community members that joined the Board of Education meeting to ask thoughtful questions. Above all else, I am grateful for the ongoing patience and grace shown by staff as we navigate these challenging times.

Sincerely,

Rachel Goldberg

Rachel Goldberg
Superintendent of Schools

