

July 17, 2020

Dear Friends and Families of ER9:

If you don't have time to read my email today, please consider attending the upcoming meetings of the Boards of Education for ER9.

JOIN THE MEETING

On Monday, July 20th, the Boards of Education of Easton, Redding and Region 9 will hold a concurrent virtual meeting at 6 p.m. The agenda includes a link to the meeting, which will be recorded and soon thereafter posted on the website. You can access the agenda at www.er9.org. Look for "Upcoming Events." On Tuesday, the Region 9 BOE will hold an additional meeting to discuss the plans for reopening the high school in greater detail.

A CARING AND CONCERNED STAFF AND FACULTY

The staff and faculty who are tasked with educating our boys and girls are largely the same people who were with us on March 13 when we closed the schools and shifted to Distance Learning. They are people who are dedicated professionals who care deeply for children and are committed to academic success each day. I say this because it is easy to lose track of the human aspect of teaching and learning.

OUR STUDENTS

Our boys and girls are neighbors, friends, long-time residents who have only lived in Easton or Redding, and we expect new faces, not just our littlest ones who are starting the adventure of school, but also new students who have moved to our towns from more congested areas.

IT'S NEVER ACCEPTABLE TO BE MEAN TO OTHERS

Some boys and girls struggle with medical issues that prevent them from being able to wear masks. The school's expectation will be that everyone who can wear a mask will wear a mask. However, we will all have to work not to stigmatize and frighten those who cannot. In some cases these children -- and can we remember please that all of our students are children -- might be able to wear face shields (the schools have a supply). I respectfully ask all families to begin conversations now about how students who can wear masks should wear their masks but more importantly how another person's medical situation should never be the subject of unkindness.

THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER

This is an ongoing crisis, and we will have to rely on the character of our towns. The call is to be the kind, welcoming, supportive and friendly people during a crisis that we are when all is well. It's in our deepest history, from Colonial times, when the Staples and the Sherwoods, the Adams and the Sanfords, the Snows, the Beeches, and so many others set down their roots, that neighbors help each other. Together, you can accomplish so much. Our ancestors used to come together for barn-raising and fellowship. You must come together for education and wellbeing.

A LAYERED STRATEGY AND A LAYERED DEFENSE

There are three ways we can contract the Covid-19 infection: (1) We can touch a surface that has the virus and then touch our faces; (2) we can inhale what a person carrying the virus exhales; (3) or we can inhale air that has the virus lingering. This calls for a layered defense. First, we have to establish cleaning routines for our common surfaces because constant cleaning destroys the virus. Second, we should maintain the six foot distance when possible and wear masks in order to protect ourselves and others. Third, we should use spacing, face shields, and plexiglass or translucent barriers when and where appropriate.

We have all seen these strategies work effectively in Connecticut because the majority of us have observed them. We have seen it in restaurants, barber shops, grocery stores and other places. We have learned that events held outside provide better conditions for remaining safe.

The Reopening Plan has taken the layered defense strategy into account. Our classrooms will be arranged differently when our boys and girls can return with reasonable expectations of safety. Desks will be spaced differently, some materials will not be shared, shared surfaces wiped down with regularity and so forth. This email is not meant to provide a detailed explanation. That will be released early next week.

THREE PHASES OF THE PLAN

If the situation in Connecticut continues to trend well, and the infection rate remains low, then one phase for the start of school will be a return to the building. This is what the Governor has directed: A full, five-day return to a safer school. Some parents might opt to retain their children at home; there will be an option for students to participate remotely, but I will tell you right now that it will not be in all respects the equivalent of real-time, in-the-classroom teaching and learning. It simply cannot be.

If conditions change, and the Governor determines that a full return to school is not suitable, then a hybrid phase has been developed. Students will be divided into two cohorts (and the arrangement will be such that all children in the same family will be in the same grouping regardless of grade, i.e. alphabetically by last name), and half of the students will be brought in on different days to minimize contact. In this plan some students would be physically present while the other grouping is virtual. No student would come into the building on Wednesdays, and that would allow for continual deep cleaning. We recognize this will impact parent work schedules, and we are working with districts in our region to align the hybrid schedule.

If conditions trend back into increased infection rates that require it, we will return to Distance Learning with all students and staff participating from home.

DETAILS

You will have dozens of questions. The detailed plan has been designed to address every aspect of education from how the buses will operate to when and where the students will eat lunch. Some parents will email their administrators asking for individualized and comprehensive responses. Please understand that your Assistant Superintendent and the building level administrators have been working without respite to get this plan pulled together. Each time they have to pause and respond individually, that robs us of time to make the plan better. We suggest you attend the meetings of the Boards of Education as well as join and participate in your PTA, PTO or PTSA. We want to be responsive, but we need every hour between now and the opening of school.

To help us train and orient the staff and faculty, the Governor has authorized the use of up to three days from the 180 student days for Professional Development and training before the students come in. If the Boards were to adopt this, these days would be used to orient teachers before the students return to school.

PARTNERSHIPS

Your teachers deserve our support and gratitude. They, too, are contemplating the impact and consequences of returning to their classrooms. Some of them may not be able to, due to medical reasons, and we are all required to protect and observe the privacy rights of others where matters pertaining to health are involved. The teacher unions are working with the Administration.

CONCLUSION

Over the last two decades, education has become more expensive (I understand that better than anyone), more pressurized, more high consequence, more tested and in many ways less joyful as a result. We are afraid and worried. When people are afraid and worried, they don't always make the best decisions. I will draw this email to a close with two observations: First, you have excellent, wonderful and dedicated representatives on your three boards. Support them as they guide the schools. Second, hold onto Easton and Redding's enduring belief that being a child in a school should be a joyful experience. At this time, that means in addition to demanding safety and learning, you as the two towns will have to practice kindness, forgiveness, tolerance, and be emotionally supportive of each other. You can do this.

PARENT SURVEY

The Assistant Superintendent will release a feedback survey to the parent and guardian community after the Reopening Plan has been presented to the Boards of Education. Look for it next week. Your feedback is important to our refinement of the plan.

I am genuinely sorry that I will not be here to work through this period with you. It is time for me to move on (in just a few days), but I have TOTAL confidence in the learning community of ER9, especially the fantastic Administrative team.

Tom McMorran
Superintendent of Schools
Easton, Redding and Region 9 School Districts