

March 13, 2020

Dear ER9 Community:

I am writing to update you on several aspects of our three school districts' work to address the temporary closure of schools due to the Coronavirus, Covid-19.

Who is reporting to the buildings while our programs are closed?

As you already know, I have closed the schools today and all of next week for students and ten-month staff and faculty. We are maintaining a presence for custodians, IT personnel, office staff and full-time administrators. Some of you have kindly expressed concern for those of us who will continue to come into the buildings. I am closely aligning our decisions in consultation with local health care professionals.

Are you working to clean the buildings?

During this time, we are making effective use of the empty buildings to continue our cleaning of all common areas, surfaces, and other parts of the buildings. To that end, we respectfully request that everyone remain off campus and not come to the schools. If you have reason to come to one of the schools, please call ahead and speak with the administrator in charge.

Are we required to complete 180 school days?

Yesterday Governor Lamont issued an executive order that set aside the requirement that each school complete 180 days of instruction. The State Department of Education and the Commissioner of Education clarified the expectation that schools will attempt to achieve 180 days, partly by extending the school year as necessary to the last day in June. However, we will not be required to remain in session if we haven't reached 180 days by then.

What is the status of engaging our students in Distance Learning that would count?

Some of you will have heard that some districts in Fairfield County have submitted a waiver attestation to the State that would allow them to experiment with conducting school days remotely. Such days would count towards the 180, but students and staff would work from home.

Easton, Redding, and Region 9 teams of teachers and administrators will be exploring the possibility of submitting a waiver to the State. However, before we do so there are specific questions that must be answered:

1. *If we undertake remote instruction, can we ensure that all households will have Internet access and computers, laptops or tablets that will support such an approach?* I can tell you that

the answer at this point is no. There are homes without Internet access or hardware. We are looking into how the Districts would provide in such situations.

2. *If we undertake remote instruction, are we able to provide compliant equity of learning for all students with special needs?* This is a very big question. With nearly 15% of our student population eligible for special services, we have to fully examine the feasibility of complying with all laws. At the moment, the guidance we have received from the State and the Bureau of Special Services is that we should not pursue the waiver. We will, however, continue to explore the possibility.

3. *If we undertake remote instruction, can we meet all of our legal contractual obligations to our staff, faculty, and administrators?* You may not be aware that our three districts' employees are members of ten different Unions or Associations. We have contracts with different teachers associations as well as support staff and custodial unions and administrator unions. We also have service providers, certain administrators, and office staff under individual contracts. Our employees are valuable and have many rights protecting their working conditions. Part of our diligence is to ensure we will continue to honor all legal commitments.

I will not continue to enumerate additional topics we must explore. We will make a good-faith effort to determine if we have the means to submit the waiver to the State.

What should students do while they are at home for a few days or possibly weeks?

You should have received emails from our principals including some help or direction for enhancement activities. We encourage, but we cannot require, that students spend some portion of each day in reading or other content-related activities.

As the weather is nice, I know many students or families will want to get together, arrange for play dates or sleepovers (I have heard rumors, but cannot substantiate them). As I type there is a group of teenagers playing basketball in the court outside my office. Please consider my gentle observation that one cannot carry water in a colander. The greater the social distance, the less the likelihood of transmission.

It is accurate to say that we are in unprecedented times. The last time schools in America were closed as part of a public health strategy was 1918. Being a student of American literature and history, I urge us to take lessons from our past.

I close with the hope that we as a community will grow closer in our decency and treatment of others even as social distancing pushes us physically apart.

I will continue to update you on a daily basis during the weekdays ahead.

Tom McMorrان, Ed.D.

Superintendent

Easton, Redding & Region 9 School Districts