

March 29, 2020

Dear Friends and Families of ER9,

This is a long email, but it has to be. Please read the entire message. In it I am asking for parent/guardian agreement to our Distance Learning initiatives.

It is my hope that we can all agree as a community to take one concern off the plates of our students, their families, and our teachers and their families. As we transition to additional means of interaction, it is imperative that everyone agree and live by a rule that no one will make recordings or take screen shots of our teachers without their express permission. The same will be true of our students and their families.

We have all seen the tributes to our Health Care professionals, and as a teacher I stand in awe of what they are doing. We have relatives, neighbors and friends in Easton and Redding, as well as the more than 50 towns in which our teachers and staff live, who are putting themselves in harm's way potentially to serve the needs of others.

In a different manner, our teachers and students can be a source of comfort and support to each other, but we have to make them all safe, too.

I need everyone to understand and agree to what I am called the Rules of Engagement for Distance Learning. In short, as we invite each other virtually into each other's homes, we must maintain good digital citizenship.

This means no recording of each other, no posting on social media, no disrespectful exchanges. Kindness and compassion will get us through this crisis.

During this time of the public health emergency due to the COVID-19 coronavirus, the Easton and Redding Public Schools are committed to providing Distance Learning opportunities for all students to the greatest extent possible.

While our schools are closed, alternative methods to brick-and-mortar face-to face instruction will be used, including on-line or virtual educational interactions with teachers and support staff, instructional phone calls or other curriculum based instructional activities. In order to continue a sense of community among students and to continue live instructional exchanges, these alternative methods may include video conferencing.

We ask for student and family cooperation in balancing the use of effective continuous strategies with respect for student confidentiality. We have worked closely with our legal counsel to craft the following language below which outlines the guidelines to allow your child to participate in live continuous Distance Learning opportunities.

This is agreement we are seeking from families. If you cannot agree to these, please contact your building principal or your child's special education administrator so we can let the teachers know to use alternative means.

From the perspective of the Parent or Guardian:

I understand that my child may be receiving short lessons through video as part of his/her Distance Learning educational opportunities. By accepting this Distance Learning plan, and unless I send you notice of my disagreement as set forth below, I agree as follows:

1. To whatever extent possible, I will make arrangements that my child participate in those lessons in a private space where, other than a parent/guardian, no other individual is present

during the period of instruction. I understand that the purpose of this is to seek to avoid any third parties from obtaining, even incidentally, any personally identifiable information about any other child.

2. I have received the Easton-Redding- Region 9: K-12 Distance Learning Plan and have reviewed the guidelines. I agree that I will do my best to comply with these guidelines. (The plan is available at the [er9.org](http://er9.org) website.)

3. I understand that as my child participates in educational opportunities available in Distance Learning, I may see, hear, or be exposed to confidential and personally identifiable information about students other than my own child. I understand that student confidentiality must be respected at all times when participating in Distance Learning. I acknowledge that it is my responsibility to respect the privacy and confidentiality of this information about all students other than my own child. I agree to maintain the confidentiality of all information that I may obtain about any students other than my own child. I will not access, use, or disclose any confidential information of any student other than my own child.

4. I agree I will not record in any way any portion of any lesson.

5. I understand that staff reserves the right to end my child's participation in a live Distance Learning session if my presence, that of my child, or any third party or activity, causes a disruption of the educational process during the Distance Learning session. If a session is terminated, the district can determine alternative means to provide the learning opportunity such as exclusively using google classroom or sending work via e-mail attachments.

6. I understand that in the course of the provision of group lessons, personally identifiable information of my child may be disclosed to undetermined and/or unknown third parties. Those individuals include the parents of other children receiving the group lessons as well as other individuals who may be in the space where the child is receiving the distance learning lesson. I understand that the Easton and Redding Boards of Educations have no control over the potential disclosure or dissemination of this information. I hereby waive any claims and actions of any kind against the Easton and Redding Boards of Education, its agents and employees, for any such disclosure of my child's confidential information and/or personally identifiable information, including claims under FERPA, as set forth herein.

By your child's participation in this plan, you are agreeing to the terms and conditions as stated above. If you disagree with these terms and conditions, you must provide us written notice of your disagreement. You can provide us with that written notice by emailing your child's principal and/or his or her Supervisor/Director of Special Services. If you are in disagreement, the live portion of the Distance Learning Plan will not be provided to your child and the district will work with you to determine a mutually beneficial means by which to address your child's educational needs.

To further clarify our attempt to transition toward Distance Learning, I remind the community that some teachers might take another week or so before they use video or live interaction. We cannot know the home situation of all faculty and staff, and I look for flexibility and compassion to originate in both directions. I have created the mnemonic STEP to help clarify our thinking.

## **A STEP in Communication Between Teachers and Students**

### STEP

#### **S is for Scheduled, Short and Safe**

Scheduled: The teacher will schedule conversations at a time that works for him or her. Teachers can initiate, but students cannot. Students or their parents can ask for different times as your situation at home determines. The teachers know that in some households there are more people than computers; they will be flexible.

Short: The expectation will be that a face-to-face, real-time conversation will be brief and not intended to use a great deal of time. Direct contact could be via a virtual "office hours" during which a teacher lets her or his students know when they could choose to log onto a session. Again, if the student cannot make it, we will all be flexible.

Safe: The context of the conversation should be safe for the teacher and the student. In some cases, a teacher might bring a behavior technician or a paraeducator or another teacher into a conversation as she would if she were in a classroom.

#### **T is for Teachers**

Teacher-Initiated. A student may text or chat or email in a request to speak with the teacher. The teacher can then designate when she will initiate contact. The teacher can opt to keep the call audio only or to continue using the chat feature of the classroom. However, some teachers might find it easier to make it audio/visual so the student's work, for instance, can be viewed by both. Students may not initiate a call to their teachers. The teacher might have to be flexible about when the child or student can take a call.

Teacher-Capable: Let's think about a teacher's time budget over four or five days of school. If she has 6 students, then her time budget will be different than if she has 100 students. Let's say she can allocate up to two hours for her 6 students vs. two hours for her 100 students. Each of the 6 might expect twenty minutes, but that would be two solid hours, so a more realistic time would be something less than that. Or it might be more based on how the teacher's total teaching time is operating, or what used to take place in a day might be spread over more than one day. The teacher with 100 students might have only a few minutes per student, and we wouldn't expect her to contact every single kid every single day or week. Again, the main form of teaching and learning has to remain Asynchronous. In some specialty areas a scheduled lesson might take place, but the general educational approach will remain asynchronous.

Teacher-Equitable: Time with the teacher is a limited resource. The teacher must weigh her availability and time to distribute it among her entire roster of students. A family cannot expect a disproportionate amount of time. In some cases, perhaps in special services or perhaps at the high school, a teacher might convene a small group for a concurrent conversation with the approval of the parent/guardian. But, we cannot ask the regular classroom teachers to attempt to run a distance version of what they were doing in February. We've only been at this for one week.

#### **E is for education. We educate the heart as well as the hands.**

Educational in Purpose: Face-to-face, real-time conversations will be for an educational purpose: To check in with a student, to clear up a confusion (because two minutes on the phone will clarify what would take ten minutes of typing). To make human contact. Here I am thinking of the elementary (and other) teachers who miss their students and want to assure them they are still there. I tend to think group interaction should be a prior videotaped message or emailed lesson plans, whereas a call would tend to be personalized.

Education that is emotionally appropriate for the age group. How a teacher interacts with a 7-year old will be different than how that teacher might interact with a 17-year old. No personally identifying information should be shared. The focus is on academics. Remember, I want us to keep our barriers

down but our boundaries up. We educators will respect your family privacy, and as we will be contacting you from our homes, we expect the same from our parent partners and students.

Education via distance learning is not intended to replace brick and mortar instruction. We must consider equity of contact opportunity. We have to think about the families that have more students than computers and therefore we cannot expect to convene full, real-time classes. If a teacher wants to set virtual "office hours" during which a student can ask for time, then those should be staggered in a manner that recognizes two siblings might be sharing one computer. There cannot be an expectation that we will offer the daily equivalent of what would be happening if the kids were in the buildings and could move from one teacher to another or from one activity to another. We must maintain the asynchronous structure, but this also doesn't mean that in some situations a teacher is not able to provide a real-time, face-to-face lesson of brief duration.

### **P is for Process**

Education is a **public** activity. Our teachers are not private tutors. So, they would be using their Google Classrooms or Google Hangouts or Zoom or some other access program that reflects the public nature of our work that has been approved via a privacy contract with the District or approval by the State. Teachers will not be able to use Facebook Facetime, for example, because that is part of their private lives if they subscribe. As a public event, the student should be in the public area of the home: The kitchen table, the dining room table, the family room, perhaps a student's own study area but not obviously some of the private areas of the house. A classroom is a public place, and if the teacher doesn't feel the exchange is public and comparable to what it would be in her classroom, then she can end the call and continue to use email or chat or text messages or Google classroom, etc. However, in an exact equivalent to a real classroom, videotaping or taking pictures of the teachers or other students is not allowed.

Education respects the **privacy** of each student. Teachers or paraeducators who are on calls will make every effort to maintain the privacy rights of their students and themselves. This might mean that small group conversations will not be convened in some grade levels or areas.

Educational exchanges that are part of Distance Learning and involve audio/visual contact will only take place with **Parental Support** and Approval. If a parent does not want this sort of interaction, and signals it to the teacher, then those teachers will respect such decisions. They will use the less direct means to continue instruction. Central Office will include language from the District's attorneys about passive consent when I communicate with the parents.

To sum up...

S: Scheduled, Short and Safe

T: Teacher- Initiated, Teacher-Capable, Teacher-Equitable

E: Educational in purpose, emotionally appropriate, and enhancing not replacing asynchronous instruction.

P: Process remains public, respects privacy and has parent approval.

Please feel free to contact your child's principal or special education supervisor or special education director with questions.

I thank you for reading another lengthy email from me. I humbly ask that we all put our hearts into this as well as our heads. Our teachers love their students, and we all want to work together to manage the anxiety this time is generating. Keeping teaching and learning moving forward should help with that. Please let you children's teachers know by emailing them if the work assigned needs adjustment. I promise everyone will be more than reasonable.

With gratitude in my heart for the people of Easton and Redding.

Tom McMorran, Ed.D.  
Superintendent  
Easton, Redding, and Region 9 School Districts