

The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Public Schools

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Superintendent of Schools

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March 1, 2021

Dear SPF Community,

From the start of this Pandemic over a year ago, the district has made it a priority to maintain safety while diligently mitigating the risk of spreading the virus. Our teachers have focused on teaching effectively by creating lessons for remote and hybrid learning. Parents and community members have supported these efforts in significant ways: they have communicated with us; they have placed confidence in our schools; they have understood how critical it is to make every effort to provide valuable teaching/learning opportunities for our students.

The Road Back: Our Journey Thus Far

In the Fall, the district took the time to ensure that our buildings had fresh air with mechanical ventilation and air purifiers. When there was a rapid increase in school centered outbreaks and a steep increase in community transmission, the district responded swiftly and shifted to remote instruction. Further, in response to predicted gatherings of groups of people around school breaks and national holidays, the district was proactive in establishing built-in quarantine periods. We learned that this practice prevented bringing COVID-19 positive individuals into our buildings and thus avoided potential shut downs. We continue to learn from the collective experience of other local and national schools while everyone is following closely the scientific evidence and reported data.

Changing Road Conditions: Opportunity to Pivot

Today, there are many reasons for optimism. First, more and more people are getting the vaccine every day. Second, we are 19 days away from the first day of Spring and the arrival of warmer weather. These factors will afford us more opportunities to be outside and allow us to safely open windows and provide additional ventilation. Third, and most importantly, the COVID-19 Activity Level Report is showing that the state of New Jersey and our towns are trending back to the Moderate Level as defined by the CDC. The NJ positivity rate was 7.3 on February 26.

The statewide rate of transmission reflects that the outbreak is slowing. We made critical decisions at inflection points when the COVID activity was increasing to ensure the safety of students and staff. Today we are making a significant pivot as the activity level is decreasing and continuing to trend in a direction favorable to opening schools more fully.

The Road Ahead: Increased Time In School for In-person Instruction

We already established that our elementary students can choose either *to return for five half-days* or *opt for remote instruction*. Next, after reviewing the size of the two cohorts, families with children

in grades 5-12 will be offered the same option, *five half-days* or *remote instruction* beginning March 15th. Students who are currently on all-remote, and who have indicated their desire to begin in-person instruction (previously the hybrid model), will be changed to five half-days in person and welcomed back on March 22nd. Students remaining on remote learning after March 22nd will have another opportunity to switch to the five half days model on April 19th. When offering five half days of in-person instruction, the district will not have a hybrid model available. Therefore, when students on the in-person track are absent from the building, they will be considered absent for the day.

The Road Beyond Spring Break

Having two full weeks of in-person instruction prior to spring break (March 15 - March 26) will provide great momentum and the opportunity to experience success with this model.

Again, anticipating that people may gather and may travel for spring holidays, the district will go to *fully virtual instruction the week after Spring break*, returning to *five half-days* of in-person instruction on April 12th.

The impetus for this decision comes from knowing that the conditions are in place now to open the schools safely for more students. Then, with our mitigation strategies in place, we will continue to address any concerns that might surface. Masking and or double masking is the most important safety practice for everyone. Maintaining social distance will also ensure further safety. We are aware that in some cases we will not be able to provide a distance of 6 feet between students. For those cases, we have provided desk shields. Numerous districts are now successfully operating under similar conditions and data shows that 3 foot distance protects students. Teachers will always be able to maintain 6 ft social distancing. Our local Department of Health supports this approach.

We are almost at our one year anniversary of this disruption of our schools and we all want what is best for our students. We are confident that we can now invite our students back safely. We will continue to follow the data and, as conditions continue to improve, we will make further adjustments to opening our schools more fully. Together we will continue to move forward for the benefit of our students and our entire community.

As our elementary school Principals did previously, this coming week, middle and high school families will receive more details and other specifics of the schedule.

Sincerely,

Dr. Joan Mast
Superintendent