



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS

Office of the Superintendent

Michael LaSusa

mlasusa@chatham-nj.org

259 Lafayette Avenue, Chatham, NJ 07928

(973) 457-2501

June 2, 2020

Dear Parent,

We have found our way to June and now are within the year's end. I know that the last few months have been tough on everyone and I want to extend my sincerest appreciation for all that you have done to play the roles of parent, teacher, counselor, coach, nurse, doctor, pharmacist, social director, mediator, quartermaster, chef, and more at your homes. Thank you sincerely for your flexibility and for soldiering through this unusual time. I am going to attempt to update you on a series of year-end topics.

Closing Out this Year

Each of our buildings has made plans to retrieve materials from students and to distribute personal belongings to students and families. This has been difficult because the latest guidance we have received is that we are not permitted to have students enter the schools for these purposes. Similarly, we have received guidance that has been changing on an almost daily basis about year-end celebrations. At the current time, the maximum number of people allowed at any gathering is 25 (including staff, students, and parents). This holds for high school graduation as well. Given this restriction, we are conducting all year-end celebrations and events virtually. The high school has already produced a number of awards ceremonies virtually and is in the process of creating a virtual graduation. The exception to the virtual events will be for our graduating seniors, who do not have any other opportunity to be celebrated as Chatham students. We are hoping that the maximum number for gatherings will be increased and that we are able to host a series of in-person graduation ceremonies, in addition to the virtual event, on July 8th. We are also planning something smaller for them at Chatham High School without spectators next week and with a maximum of 25 total faculty present.

Summer Activities

Governor Murphy announced last week that certain summer activities and programs would be permitted in the coming month. He also announced that the Department of Health will be releasing guidelines schools must follow to allow for these activities. We are awaiting those guidelines and will make determinations about summer activities once we have them.

Resumption of School

Foremost on the minds of most of us is the resumption of school. I have been involved in many meetings with state officials and superintendents across New Jersey about this issue. There are no concrete plans or rules to help guide us definitively at the moment, so I would like to provide you with some of my thoughts and feelings based on what I am hearing and seeing. (Note: these are just my own thoughts, which probably means that they are wrong and definitely means they will change based on changing conditions or new information)

School and Instruction

It is possible that all relevant metrics concerning Covid-19 in New Jersey will continue to trend in the right direction and each week that passes will mark another step toward normalcy. Ideally, we will be in a position in a couple of months that sees us all return to schools in a fairly normal fashion. This is the best-case scenario and the one we will hope for.

It is also possible that at some point next year--whether it is in the beginning of the year or later on--we will be required to conduct school virtually again. This determination will likely be made either statewide by the Governor or the Department of Health, as it was this year. We have begun to plan for this prospect and are revising and improving our remote instruction plan. For many reasons, this year our guiding principle while on virtual instruction has been to remain flexible. There was a huge range of circumstances at play in the homes of families in the district, particularly during the months of March and April, and we prioritized flexibility.

The cost of flexibility was structure. While we are still building our plan for next year, I can tell you of at least two changes we will prepare for:

- We will supply district Chromebooks to all students prior to closure. This includes students at the K-5 level so that there will be less sharing of devices at home.
- We will have more structure in place in the form of defined schedules at each school.

I want to be clear that having more defined schedules does not mean that we will have whole-class, live lessons for multiple hours every day. I do not think this is an effective form of instruction and I would invite you to please [read this op-ed](#) when you have a few minutes because it explains why I feel this way. Still, I think it will be important to provide more structure to students, more opportunities for deliberate social interaction among groups of students, and more live interaction between students and teachers.

It is also possible that schools might not reopen as normal nor be in a strict virtual instruction mode. The third scenario that we are planning for is for schools to open, but open with mitigation strategies and restrictions in effect. These restrictions may arise from guidelines recently issued by organizations like [the CDC](#), the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), and [UNICEF/World Health Organization](#). I am attaching to this email the CDC guidelines specific to schools. If you take the time to peruse any of these documents, you will see that reopening schools with these kinds of restrictions in effect will dramatically alter how schools operate and look.

IF schools in New Jersey are required to incorporate the various recommendations in these documents, the following is possible:

- Schools might not have all students present in school at the same time; we may have a rotational schedule in which one-third or one-quarter of students report on any given day.
- Thus we may have a hybrid model of instruction in which students work virtually on some days and report to school on other days.
- We might not be able to bring students together for large gatherings, including a common lunch, assembly, concert, etc.
- Interscholastic athletics and other extracurricular activities may be suspended or dramatically altered.
- Staff and students may be scanned for their temperature on a daily basis.
- Visitors, including parents, may not be permitted in school buildings except in special circumstances.
- Nurse offices may need to be revamped, both in physical layout and from a procedural point of view.
- School buses may run at a significantly reduced capacity.

I reiterate that the above is just a brief snapshot of what COULD be possible IF schools open with an adherence to some of the guidelines published to date. The extent to which the above may become reality will likely be determined at a state level. Many superintendents have been in contact with state officials and legislators to urge them to lay out the rules and requirements for schools as soon as possible so that we may best prepare for what lies ahead. I am hopeful that by the end of June we have definitive guidance. For now, we will hope for the best and prepare for everything.

Transportation

We have made adjustments to our transportation processes and plan to have all bus assignments finalized and communicated to families by about August 15. Questions about school busing and social distancing are prominent among school districts right now. If you are interested in subscription busing, the letter detailing subscription busing is attached to this email message and the link to the online application is here. It is possible that the amount of subscription busing we are able to offer next year will be reduced as a result of potential mitigation requirements associated with Covid-19.

Finances

The state released a preliminary report on its financial picture two weeks ago, as well as initial indications of state aid reductions. The initial indication is that our state aid cut will be about \$300K, or about 9% of the state aid we were slated to receive. However, there will likely be an additional reduction when the final state budget is struck in September. In anticipation of funding losses, we are suspending non-essential purchases, freezing most professional development activities outside of the district, and delaying non-urgent construction and maintenance projects. Given the timing and the nature of the funding losses we will experience, it is likely that we will have a loss of revenue in at least both the coming school year (20/21) and the following year (21/22). We will make adjustments to our budget as we have more information, and I will communicate potential impacts to programs as needed.

Taking Cues

The NBA suspended its season on March 11 and has not yet announced its plans to resume play. Major League Baseball never started its season and has no plans to resume before July 4, if at all. These are organizations with a relatively fixed number of staff, unlimited resources, and a business model that has them losing billions of dollars of revenue while closed.

The New York Stock Exchange opened last week for the first time since March. It is operating at 25% staff capacity, all employees have a temperature check upon arriving at work, and social distancing and mask-wearing are the rule on the floor. Facebook announced in mid-April that it was suspending all in-person gatherings of 50 people or more until June of 2021.

I mention the above because we are more complex than any of these entities. There are 1.4 million public school students in New Jersey, thousands of facilities, and tens of thousands staff members. If professional sports organizations are struggling to put together the pieces of the puzzle for their return, it is not hard to see why there are a lot of questions about how to reopen our schools. It is also not hard to see why it is at least possible that schools will be very different when we return than they were when we left in March.

I will convey updates to you about our reopening as soon as I have them. For now, we are planning for every scenario. What would probably be most helpful at the present time is to try to be open-minded about what the future could bring and to acknowledge that there will be an adjustment period that could initially be disappointing or even upsetting if schools do in fact look different than before. The first time I ventured out to ShopRite after we all locked down it felt more than a little weird to form a line around the building on dots painted on the sidewalk and spaced six feet apart, see everyone wearing a mask, and to pay for my items behind plexiglass. We may experience the same feelings when we return to schools. But I feel more comfortable in ShopRite already (as well as Costco and Home Depot!) and eventually we will feel comfortable in schools, however they may change. We will tend to the emotional health of our students through this adjustment.

On a final note, I am proud to say that our second annual TEDxYouth@Chatham event will take place this Friday night at 7:00 pm. You may sign up for the stream and live panel discussion [at this link](#). One of the benefits of being virtual this year is that we can exceed our auditorium capacity, so please join!

Thank you again and I wish you health and decompression as we enter the summer.

Sincerely,

Michael LaSusa

Michael LaSusa