



## **SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS**

### **Office of the Superintendent**

*Michael LaSusa*

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**(973) 457-2501**

December 19, 2021

Dear Parents,

I am writing to address a number of issues and concerns since my note on Wednesday.

#### School Status and Covid

I have been in communication with the local health department today. Covid cases have continued to rise quickly over the weekend and have affected all age levels of school children and the general community. After discussing all of the options and the benefits and drawbacks of each, we have agreed that the district will transition to an Early Dismissal schedule for all schools every day of this week. The dismissal times for the schools will be:

Chatham High School:	12:00 p.m.
Chatham Middle School:	12:00 p.m.
Lafayette Avenue School:	12:45 p.m.
SBS, WAS, and MAS:	12:35 p.m.
AM Kindergarten:	8:35 a.m. – 10:35 a.m.
PM Kindergarten:	10:35 a.m. – 12:35 p.m.
AM Pre-School:	8:40 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.
PM Pre-School:	10:40 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.
Full-Day Pre-School:	9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Principals will communicate additional scheduling details for each school. Lunch will not be provided at school, but we are working on possibly allowing lunch to be ordered and then distributed upon dismissal.

I recognize that there are parents who believe that our schools should transition completely to remote instruction. While this perhaps might reduce risk of Covid transmission, it also can have adverse impacts on the mental health, academic progress, and overall well-being of students. To date, the district has performed more than 50 risk assessments for suicide ideation or other concerns over self-harm for our students. This is a greater number of risk assessments than we normally perform over an entire year. In my discussions with our health official, we believe that keeping schools open on an abbreviated schedule,

without lunch taking place, is a balanced approach toward trying to slow the spread of the virus while continuing to provide critical educational services to students.

### Attendance

I have received a number of parent emails about attendance this coming week. Let me try to explain how our attendance policies are designed. First of all, when a parent calls a child out from school—due to illness, a death in the family, a doctor’s appointment, and so forth—that absence is considered excused from a district perspective. A student is not penalized for absences that parents verify. If a student reaches a certain number of absences—16 at the high school, for example—they may be placed into a loss-of-credit status. When this takes place, school personnel meet with the student and consider the circumstances. If, for example, five of the absences were the result of a death in the family and another five were the result of a bout of the flu, the student would not be at any risk of loss of credit. Given the current circumstances—that we are now in the third year of a global pandemic, cases are rising faster than ever before in our community and region at large, etc.--the school district will not penalize any student for being absent this week or the week after break. **NO STUDENT WILL FACE A LOSS OF CREDIT** for the absences accrued this week or the week after break. Any student who is absent for any reason will have access to the Google Meet for that class. The exceptions to this may be in classes like phys. ed. or other spaces where livestreaming might not be possible

### Communication in General

Some parents have expressed disappointment and frustration with me over my decision to not send out a district-wide communication last week about a baseless, anonymous, unsubstantiated, non-credible rumor circulating on a social media platform. Let me explain why I made this decision. I received notification from state officials about this rumor on Thursday morning. The notification explicitly stated that it was a non-credible, non-specific rumor that did not constitute a threat and did not even reference New Jersey. The notification suggested informing other school administrators and speaking with local law enforcement, and did not recommend a widespread notification. I spoke with multiple law enforcement officials on Thursday and Friday, and none thought that I should have sent a district-wide notice. There are a number of reasons for this. While I recognize that some or even many people may have been reassured by a note from me, there are drawbacks to widespread communication on an issue like that. First, a widespread notification could be perceived by some as lending credence to something that was deemed by authorities to not be credible. Second, while a notice is reassuring to many, for others, particularly students who may be prone to anxiety, a notice could have the opposite effect and exacerbate those feelings. Finally, a notification about an anonymous and baseless rumor sets the potential expectation that in the future the district will address other discredited and/or non-specific, non-credible rumors that circulate on social media. This could be unsustainable and also could reduce the attention that serious and credible threats deserve. The district corresponds regularly with our local police departments. We drill and meet regularly with local police. And we have three full-time police officers stationed at our schools. We treat every rumor or threat on a case by case basis, with the absolute and total commitment to keeping our students safe. If I believe there is a need to communicate a concern to parents, I will not hesitate to do so.

### Quarantining

The CDC announced on Friday that it supports a test-to-stay approach to dealing with Covid cases in schools. Test-to-stay enables unvaccinated students to continue to attend school, so long as they test negative for Covid on a determined schedule (daily, for example). The district will actively pursue a transition to this kind of model when we return in the new year in order to enable all students to not miss school when Covid is present in a close contact.

I am sorry that the final weeks of 2021 have not been smooth and that we have run into a moment in which we need to alter our school day. My hope is that we will be able to make it through the next four days in this alternative format and get to the break. I will correspond with our local health officials and others over the break, and will communicate future adjustments to you prior to Monday, January 3. Please be advised that there are approximately 2,500 parents in our school district and it is not always possible for me to respond to every single email or phone call I receive from individual parents.

Thank you as always for your understanding. I hope that this is the last message that I need to send before the holidays and that all of you enjoy a healthy and happy vacation.

Sincerely,

*Michael LaSusa*