



## **SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CHATHAMS**

### **Office of the Superintendent**

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Dear Parents and Staff Members,

Thank you for your flexibility and efforts today. In a good year, the worst day of the year is the day after the holiday break. This year, it was not only tough to get up early again, but then there were many obstacles to surmount. We got through today, albeit imperfectly, and now we can try to get through tomorrow. The purpose of this note is to provide you with a general feel for where the district is right now and my thinking on how to proceed.

Approximately 77% of our students attended school in-person today. Two years ago, before any of us ever heard of a coronavirus, that number was 90%. We are off the highs, but we are closer to 90 than 0.

We have had more than 60 staff members report positive Covid cases since the holiday recess began. Our staffing levels remain tenuous and we will do the best we can to continue to operate all schools on a regular schedule, but doing so will be imperfect and the status of schools could change quickly. While it may seem that it makes sense to move to virtual instruction if we are short staff, it actually means it is more likely that students will be at home unable to have access to any instruction at all. Unlike last year, when most if not all of our teachers were healthy during small periods of virtual instruction, right now many of our teachers are sick. If teachers are sick, they are not teaching. We can cover classes and engage in all kinds of creative arrangements for staff members when we are in school, but not as much when we are virtual. It is bad enough for students to have to be on virtual instruction when they have a full schedule; when there are holes in that schedule due to lack of staff, it is worse.

It is likewise understandable that abbreviated school days are tolerable or even preferred for some. For others, particularly students who have special learning or other needs, they are less than ideal. Ditto for many working parents. Abbreviated days remain a potential option moving forward, but they are not what is best for the greatest number of students.

Our transportation and food services functioned as normal today, but that could also change abruptly if our providers experience staff disruptions. All parents should be prepared for the possibility that some of our bus routes will not run this week. We will communicate this as soon as we are notified of such an event by our transportation provider, but parents should consider making alternative transportation arrangements as a back-up if possible..

The percentage of students who have received at least one dose of vaccine is as follows:

- K-3 = 65%
- LAF = 74%
- CMS = 85%
- CHS = 92%

We received reports of about 125 Covid cases among students today, which include those reported to us over the holidays. Please continue to communicate with our nurses regarding positive test results and please keep your child home from school if they are sick. Keeping children home when sick is probably the single biggest form of support a parent can provide the district right now.

Below are some adjustments/updates to note:

- For the month of January, we will transition all parent conferences and meetings with school personnel (including counselors and CST members) to a virtual format. These meetings typically include multiple individuals and take place in offices and small conference rooms. Moving to a virtual format is a temporary measure to attempt to reduce potential staff exposures, since we cannot afford to lose staff to illness.
- We are modifying or rescheduling performing arts events that are scheduled to take place over the next month. Specific alterations and announcements will come from the individual schools and our performing arts staff.
- I have been in contact with our student Covid testing provider, LTS. We are aiming to increase the number of days they are offering testing to students. Current testing takes place every Friday at 3:00 pm at Chatham Middle School, and all students are eligible if their parents consent to it and accompany them. Once we are able to schedule more days with LTS, it will be a step toward implementing a test-to-stay program to reduce quarantining.
- We will operate the livestream from classrooms through next week. We are in the process of discussing arrangements for students who have been utilizing the livestream to come into school after the school day to make up their assessments. This is especially important at the high school, where the end of the semester involves the transmittal of transcripts to colleges.

I understand that some of our parents believe that schools should be virtual this week, some believe that we should be fully open without masks and other mitigation measures, and some believe we should be on a reduced schedule to eliminate lunch. I am sharing what follows with you to give you a sense of my thinking. I am not trying to convince anyone of anything and I understand that one can debate every aspect of this. But this is where I am coming from in terms of my views of the district right now and I am sharing it to try to answer some of the questions I have received.

Some have asked what it will take to close the schools and what number of cases must occur before considering full virtual instruction. The answer is that there is no magic number. We have had more than 450 staff and student cases reported to us since Thanksgiving. That is roughly 10% of the total population in our schools. This number of cases would have been unimaginable a year ago and would have closed schools indefinitely. Fortunately, this is not a year ago. The risk of severe disease, while not zero, continues to remain low for children relative to other age groups and vaccinations have further reduced that risk. Vaccinations have also significantly reduced the risk to adults. According to the C.D.C., vaccinated individuals are far less likely to be hospitalized than unvaccinated individuals and also far less

likely to have other severe outcomes. 90%+ of our staff is vaccinated. Every staff member has had the opportunity to be fully vaccinated. 99% of our parents have had the opportunity to vaccinate their child. Everyone has made the decision they think best for themselves and their families. For individuals who do become sick, regardless of vaccination status, there are more treatments available than at any other point in the pandemic. The response to a high number of cases should not be the closure of school or the reduction of school experiences for students. It is important—some might say vital—for children (regardless of vaccination status) to be in school and to be able to have access to the full complement of school experiences.

If it becomes impossible to keep schools fully open due to staffing shortages or other forces beyond our control, we will have to weigh our options and make the necessary adjustments. The goal, however, will remain to provide as much in-person, normalized schooling to students as possible, recognizing that this is an abnormal and extraordinary period of time. If every major child health organization asserts that schools should be among the last places in society to close, then schools should not close so long as nightclubs, bars, and sports arenas are open and packed. We will continue to employ mitigation efforts—masking, distancing as much as feasible, ventilation through mechanical means and open windows, eating outside when possible, increased availability of testing—to try to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus and keep our kids and staff members as healthy as possible. We also will remain steadfast in addressing the mental health needs of our students both through explicit interventions like counselor check-ins and teletherapy sessions as well as the implicit and inherent social and emotional benefits of being in school.

I shared with some of my staff this weekend that I have thought a bit about Hurricane Sandy recently. Hurricane Sandy hit on a Sunday and knocked out electricity in pretty much all of Chatham, including all of our schools. By the following weekend, electricity had been restored at all schools except for SBS, but hardly any of the community at large. I remember meeting with Board Members, school staff, and first responders in the CHS LMC on that Sunday morning and sketching out a plan that entailed relocating the 500 students and staff from SBS to three other schools in the district. I remember sitting in the CHS main office at about 6:00 pm that night and sending out the message that schools would reopen the following day, and immediately receiving an onslaught of angry messages right back from parents and staff that I was insensitive and out of my mind for expecting people to get to school given the state of the community. Most students and staff had no electricity in their homes. Some of us did not even have running water. There was no transportation available that week because some roads were impassable and bus stops were dangerous. There were a lot of reasons to stay shut.

Within about 48 hours, though, it was clear that the overwhelming majority of families and school staff were thrilled to be back at school. They were happy to be inside a warm building for the day. They were happy to have running water if they did not have that where they lived. They were happy to be back together after suffering in dark houses. The first week back was even less perfect inside the schools than anything we have experienced so far this year, but giving the students who were able to attend the ability to do so was the best thing we could do for the greatest number of students and families.

I believe that right now the best thing for the greatest number of kids is to be in school. Students might not have access to all their teachers at the present time, they might not get to participate in every single activity the way they want, they might have to continue to wear a mask, and they might not be sealed off from all exposure to Covid, but it is better that they are able to come to school—interacting with one another and their teachers—than have to stay at home for all or even part of the day.

I spent some time in the high school today and also in the days leading up to the break. Multiple students, unprompted and in the hallways, have thanked me for keeping schools open. Putting aside that usually most students don't even know who I am, I never thought I would see the day when high schoolers—who usually are begging me to close school due to the snow, the heat, flooding, Halloween, the day after the Superbowl, etc.--would thank me for keeping schools open in the middle of the winter. The world is indeed upside down!

Again, I respect all of the viewpoints that differ from the above. This is not meant to be persuasive; it is meant to be open. I will continue to apprise you of any changes as we make our way through the coming days and weeks, which will be difficult, but the guiding principle is to remain open for business, for kids.

Sincerely,

*Michael LaSusa*

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