

## **Guest Op-Ed: Back-to-School 2020**

### **East Bay RI Superintendents**

*August 3, 2020*

As the Superintendents of eight school districts in the East Bay, we are keenly aware of the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the start of the new school year.

Every day, we speak to parents who want what is best for their children. They need reassurance that if schools reopen, we will have the necessary precautions in place to protect students and adults from the virus. They also recall the challenges they experienced last spring, trying to support their students through distance learning, often while working from home themselves. Many parents watched their children struggle without interaction with their peers, and without many of the academic, mental, emotional, and physical supports available in schools. They weigh the risks of the immediate public health situation against the longer-term academic and non-academic risks of students being out of school for an extended time.

We also hear the voices of our teachers and staff, many of whom are worried not only about their own health, but also about the health of their loved ones at home. They're asking insightful questions and raising valid concerns about how we will institute safety protocols and redesign the layout, schedule, and culture of schools to keep everyone safe. At the same time, educators deeply understand what their students are losing every day that they are not in school. Our staffs worked hard during the last three months of the school year to make the most of distance learning, but they know that remote teaching can never be an adequate substitute for live interaction with students.

We wrestle with the same dilemmas.

Throughout the summer, each of us has been working closely with our teachers, administrators, parents, union leaders, public health officials, School Committees, community task forces, and with one another, to confront the incredibly complex issues associated with operating schools safely in the age of Covid-19. We study State guidance, consult with medical experts, monitor public health data, examine floor plans, brainstorm strategies to restructure the school day, and consider alternate transportation plans. We do all of this and more because we share the Governor's conviction that our students are best served in school buildings, and we must explore every option to bring as many students back as possible, as long as we can do so safely and responsibly.

Like every community in Rhode Island, each of our districts has submitted to the State three reopening plans, designed to describe our capacity to provide full in-person learning, full distance learning, or a hybrid model that includes a mix of both. In the case of a hybrid model, some students (particularly students with disabilities and others with greater need for in-

person learning) may be in school every day, while other students would alternate between in-person and distance learning. In fact, there will be some distance learning in any model, given that some parents will opt for full distance learning, and students who display symptoms will have to remain home from school. Therefore, even as we investigate options for reopening buildings, we continue to develop improvements to our distance learning plans.

One of the key questions when assessing the viability of any model is, *How well does it enable students and adults to adhere to the critical safety precautions?* Foremost among these precautions is the ability to maintain safe distance between people, ideally no less than six feet at any given time. It is this essential precaution that requires us to reduce class sizes, space desks farther apart, restructure meal service and transitions between classes, reduce the capacity of school buses, and adopt other measures to eliminate crowding. Medical experts assert that these steps – when combined with face covering, frequent hand washing, cleaning and sanitizing facilities, remaining in stable groups or “pods,” symptom screening, and staying home when ill – greatly reduce the risk of spreading the virus. For any in-person learning model to be successful, each of us will have to be vigilant about adhering to these precautions.

Of course, countless questions remain, and we’re working hard to answer them with the best information available to us. Families and staff rightfully want to know about the availability of testing, how schools will respond when someone tests positive for the virus, what options there will be for people with health conditions that put them at greater risk, and much more. Our constituents also have specific questions about whether schools can safely offer pre-school programs, after-school activities, interscholastic sports, arts and music, physical education, and career and technical courses, to name just a few. Again, these are some of the many questions that our teams are problem-solving every day, and they are among the questions that keep us up at night.

Governor Gina Raimondo and RIDE Commissioner Angelica Infante-Green have stated that they have no foregone conclusion for how the school year will begin, and that much work remains to be done over the next month and beyond. As Superintendents, we are very much still engaged in an intensive process of planning, analysis, and revision, informed by community feedback, designed to ensure a successful start to the school year under a variety of potential scenarios. And we await clarity about whether these decisions ultimately will be made at the state or local level.

We also ascribe to the Governor’s assertion that we will “follow the science.” We’re fortunate to live and work in a state that has earned national recognition for controlling the spread of the virus precisely because our leaders have imposed rules based on scientific facts, and because most residents have been vigilant in adhering to those rules. At this point, many states cannot even consider reopening schools because the virus continues to spike, while we are able to explore the possibility because Rhode Island’s methodical approach to the crisis has “flattened the curve” and enabled the state gradually to begin reopening.

In the midst of all this uncertainty, one thing remains certain, and that is that no two households are identical. Every family and employee in our school districts has a unique set of circumstances, needs, resources, supports, employment conditions, socio-economic realities, medical histories, and myriad other variables. These factors underscore our need to focus deeply on *equity* in all of our proposals and decisions. To that end, we must continue to hear from our communities about the strengths and challenges of each of the proposed scenarios. Above all, we ask for continued patience and cooperation from all of our families and staff as we work in these truly unprecedented times toward our shared goal of a successful start to the new school year.

*Co-signed by the Superintendents of Schools in East Bay, Rhode Island:*

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