



**OLD ROCHESTER REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY UNION #55**
Marion - Mattapoisett - Rochester
135 Marion Road, Mattapoisett, MA 02739

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STATEMENT ON REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

It is my hope that our students, families, and staff members are enjoying the summer season, while continuing to adhere to social distancing best practices and all known safety precautions.

I am writing with an update on our planning process for the start of a new school year in the Old Rochester Regional School District and Superintendency Union #55 schools. Many stakeholders including staff administrators, staff, parents, guardians, students, school committee members, and town officials have been diligently working and planning for the upcoming 2020-2021 school year. With flexibility recently given to local school districts from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education regarding student learning time requirements – our Joint School Committee will convene in early August to consider revising the currently adopted 2020-2021 school calendar to allow for sufficient training and preparation time for educators and staff members prior to school resuming. It is anticipated that student learning will commence no later than September 16, 2020. Upon school committee approval of a revised school calendar – I will promptly share it with our school community.

Our planning process continues to be guided by a vigilant monitoring of public health data in Massachusetts, and we are encouraged that indicators about the virus continue to move in the right direction. The Commonwealth's careful and disciplined approach has enabled our state gradually to begin reopening, in part because of strong compliance with health and safety precautions. The question now on all of our minds is how and when we apply those lessons learned to begin safely reopening our public schools.

As you have heard, the Massachusetts Department of Education has directed districts to submit by July 31, 2020, a preliminary plan that addresses the feasibility of three options for serving students at the start of the school year. Those options include a full return to daily, in-person attendance, a hybrid plan combining in-school learning with some remote learning, and finally, a 100% remote learning program. Each district's comprehensive plan, approved by the School Committee, is due to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) by August 10, 2020. Given the significant changes these plans will require in the way schools operate, we also must negotiate our proposal with all employee unions impacted: teachers and support staff. We are on a very tight timeline--a mere two weeks until the August 10, 2020 deadline set by the DESE for submitting comprehensive fall plans.

Of course, we know that under normal circumstances, students would be best served in schools every day, interacting with their peers and engaged in live classroom learning. While our educators and families worked incredibly hard last spring to implement remote learning, we know that approach presented enormous challenges, did not reach all students (particularly those with the greatest needs), and is not an adequate substitute for in-person interaction with teachers. When out of school, our students also lack access to all of the academic, mental, and physical supports that help ensure their social-emotional well-being – especially during these tremendously challenging times. Therefore, we want more than anything to be able to offer as many in-person learning opportunities as possible to our students and families.

In order to adhere to the school re-opening guidance provided by DESE, consistent with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the American Pediatric Association, we also do not believe we can safely meet physical distancing requirements with all students and staff in the buildings at the same time. However, we do believe we can make significant changes in our school schedules and operating procedures to make a partial return to in-person learning both safe and successful. This approach will require strategies to ensure physical distancing, as well as a series of other critical health and safety measures, including wearing face coverings, washing hands frequently, cleaning and sanitizing facilities, screening regularly for symptoms of illness, and staying home from school when sick, among others. Our planning process includes a comprehensive set of strategies and investments to minimize the risk of transmitting the virus.

The mission of our school system is to inspire all students to think, to learn and to care. The Old Rochester Regional School District does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, sex, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, homelessness or disability in admission to, access to, treatment in or employment in its programs and activities.



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As a result, we plan to formally propose to our school committees and to pursue negotiations with all impacted unions for a hybrid learning plan, which would bring the students back into school buildings for in-person instruction in smaller, socially distanced groups on a rotating basis, combined with a robust remote learning program on the days students are not scheduled to be physically in school. This plan also enables us to bring a subset of students in greatest need of in-person instruction and support, particularly students with disabilities, back to school every day – but also in smaller, distanced settings with all other precautions in place.

We recognize that the circumstances of every family and staff member are different, and that no plan ultimately will satisfy everyone in our community. But rest assured that we are working diligently to explore every option available to us, that we remain guided by the science to keep our students and staff safe and healthy, and that we will be prepared to make adjustments along the way if the public health conditions or other variables change over time. We know that no plan is set in stone and is subject to change.

As we move closer to finalizing a comprehensive plan to reopen schools, we welcome continued input and feedback from all of our stakeholders. The survey data we have received in recent weeks has been incredibly valuable and is strongly considered in all aspects of our planning. All school committee meetings are publicly posted. We also invite you to share your questions, comments, and ideas to help inform and strengthen our plans (508-758-2772 ext.1956 or by email at orrsd@olderochester.org).

We will keep you informed about our progress in developing a comprehensive fall reopening plan and in our negotiations with the unions. I am confident that we can prioritize both safety and learning as we prepare for the start of a successful school year. Thank you for your patience and cooperation in these difficult times.

Michael S. Nelson

SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

JULY 31, 2020

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