



CITY OF SOMERVILLE
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MAYOR



MASSACHUSETTS
MARY SKIPPER
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

July 24, 2020

Dear Somerville Public Schools Parents, Guardians, and Staff:

As we continue to work through the complexities of developing a back-to-school plan for this fall, we want to be responsive to your concerns and continue to keep you informed on our thinking and progress. We understand the unbearable uncertainty that parents are facing. While we cannot provide all the answers at this point, we can provide transparency in our process. We can also share the questions and challenges that are coming up as we move through the planning process.

Our guiding values in making decisions that impact our students, families and staff has not changed. The health and safety of our school communities continues to be our priority, and the current Public Health Crisis presents new challenges. Given our diversity, the density of our community, the many parents and guardians who are essential workers, and the disparate health outcomes that we have seen from the Covid-19 virus, it is incumbent on us to ensure that we consider every possible scenario as we look for the best way for all students to return to our classrooms. Throughout all of this, the complexity and unpredictability of this virus means that whatever plan or decision we make must be fluid in order to respond to rapidly changing health information around the virus and its spread.

As required by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, we are continuing our work on developing a district plan that includes three possible learning models:

- fully remote instruction,
- a hybrid of remote and in-person instruction , and
- fully in-person instruction in school.

In [last week's update](#) from the Superintendent, we outlined what our planning work to date has entailed. While we have made a great deal of progress in preparing our buildings and developing safety protocols in the event that we are able to return to some type of in-person learning, it is clear from all the planning work thus far that returning **all** students back in the schools full-time at the start of the school year is **not** a safe option. Therefore, our focus for the start of the school year will be on developing two models: a hybrid model that includes in-person and remote learning and a second model that is fully remote. At the same time, we will continue to prepare for an eventual full return to our classrooms at the appropriate time in the future.

Our planning for a safe return to classrooms in a hybrid model includes many factors. We will of course meet all requirements set forth by the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education such as health screening, keeping elementary students in the same groups throughout the day, and establishing robust remote learning. We are also planning to exceed DESE safety measures where advisable and possible. Below are some measures that we have already put in place followed by factors still under review:

Additional Measures in place:



- A minimum 6-foot social distancing requirement at all times in our school buildings and campuses, exceeding the 3-foot distance allowed by the State.
- New furniture and desks where needed that can better ensure the 6-foot distance in classrooms; that furniture has been ordered.
- Staggered entrance and exit plans, as well as hall and stairway signage to control social distancing.
- Face coverings required for **all** students and staff, except students with sensory impairments. Special accommodations will also be made for students and staff with health conditions that might preclude the safe use of a face mask. This exceeds state requirements, which only require face coverings for students in 2nd grade and higher.
- Clear protocols for bathroom use, including regular hand-washing and regular use of hand sanitizer.
- Personal protective equipment for students and staff. Items include face masks, clear masks for the teaching of language development and social development skills, face shields, gowns, gloves, hand sanitizer, and other items that will be available in every school building.
- Limited sharing of materials among students. Students will have their own set of materials to use while in the classroom and their own storage container and space for these items. Some content areas will also be sending materials home for students to use on remote days.
- The use of plexiglass dividers in offices, some classrooms and other spaces such as cafeterias.
- A training program for staff, students and parents on the new health and safety protocols.
- There is active planning for serving lunch outside of the school cafeteria in classrooms, open spaces in the school building and in outdoor spaces on the school campus. We are also working to continue to address food insecurity on the remote days given that we are currently serving an estimated 3,000 meals each week.
- Distribution of Chromebooks and mobile hotspots will continue in August prior to the start of the school year for students still in need of a device and internet connection.

Measures in development and under review:

We continue to review local, state, and national data and trends on this pandemic throughout our planning to help inform our decision-making process. As you can imagine, there are many issues we are still addressing and working to solve based on the best available research, guidance, and practices. These include -- but are not limited to -- the following:

- **Ventilation and Air Filtration:** We are assessing the building ventilation and filtration systems in each of our schools, and identifying modifications that may need to be made to school buildings to meet all recommended health and safety protocols.
- **Family preferences and needs:** We are continuing to gather data from families and staff about their opinions on the various models and schedules, their comfort levels and concerns with each and the needs that will need to be addressed to support their child's learning in different scenarios.
- **Transportation:** Safe transportation to school is needed to reduce exposure risk. We have been in communication with our transportation vendors on possible safety protocols. While it is possible to implement an appropriate social distancing protocol on larger school buses, meeting our minimum 6-foot distancing requirement may not be possible on the smaller school vans that many of our students use. Given our transportation partners are unable to add buses to our routes, we will work with our community to find alternative solutions such as walking and biking.
- **Proactive COVID-19 Testing:** A robust and proactive testing plan is an essential part of a health crisis safety plan. We are exploring medical guidance and potential COVID-19 testing protocols for safely conducting ongoing monitoring of students and staff in order to identify any infections early and reduce potential for spread.
- **Continuity of Learning:** Plans are being developed on how to best balance continuity of learning with the protocols that will need to be in place in the event of a confirmed positive case in one of our schools. Parents will need to have quarantine and isolation plans in place in case of positive cases. Plans to accommodate teacher absences due to quarantine and isolation must also be in



place. This presents particular challenges in some specialized areas such as special education programming.

- **Staffing:** Staff availability may be affected and unpredictable due to a number of factors including staff health, staff virus exposure requiring quarantine or isolation, and childcare access. As noted above, developing staffing plans that maintain continuity of instruction while accounting for staff situational needs is a priority.
- **Union considerations:** We have been and will be in dialogue with all of our unions to develop agreements relative to change of working conditions that need to be negotiated. With no state-wide union agreement, each district will need to negotiate with their individual union on a re-entry plan that they mutually feel best meets the needs of their school communities.

We are working diligently to address the complex challenges facing the district to ensure that Somerville Public School students can safely progress in their education this fall. As you can see, there are still many issues to consider. Yesterday you received a notice of upcoming joint City/District School Planning forums over the next two weeks. We hope you will join us for these virtual Town Halls as we work through remaining issues.

Our goal is to make a final decision as soon as possible so that you can plan accordingly. The reality is that there is no perfect solution to this issue. We will make the best decision possible, given the constraints under which we must operate because of this public health crisis and the information we have at hand.

Respectfully,

Mayor Joe Curtatone, School Committee Chair Carrie Normand, and Superintendent Mary Skipper

