August 10, 2020

Dear Little Silver Families,

I hope you are all doing well and continuing to find ways to enjoy the summer as much as possible. After the last Board of Education meeting, it became clear that there are many questions and concerns that are circulating in the parent community regarding the reopening plans for our schools. Since that meeting, I suspect that some new questions may have come to the surface in light of what is happening in other districts around the county as well. I am hoping that this update will address at least a few of those concerns and answer some of the questions you may have.

Although some districts have made the decision to begin the school year with a fully remote approach for all staff and students, our district remains committed to the gradual reopening that is outlined in phase 2 of our district’s Reopening Plan. Once we are able to review the data from the follow up parent survey this week, we will be able to finalize our plans regarding student cohorts and the potential need to create any fully remote section at a particular grade level. As of now, our intention is to move forward with creating A/B student cohorts for all grades from K - 8 that will include roughly 50% of the students attending school for in-person learning on their designated days. The student cohorts will be released to families during the week of August 17.

As per Governor Murphy’s directive, our district’s official Reopening Plan was submitted to the County Office for review last Friday. Given that the document is a policy for the district, it needs to be reviewed and approved by the Board of Education. Once the plan is formally approved on August 27, it will be posted on the district’s website. For now, I will share that efforts are currently underway to streamline the document and provide families with a more reader-friendly version of the information in the form of a slide deck that is being created by our district’s administrative team. The slides will include specifics about the schedules for both schools and other information pertaining to the areas of health & safety and our learning plans for September. The slide deck will be posted on the website by the end of this week.

As we know, planning efforts in all districts continue to evolve for many reasons, including decisions being made by Governor Murphy. One of those recent decisions focused on the issue of wearing masks in school. As it stands, all staff and students will be required to wear face coverings when in school at all times. Exceptions will be made for students with special needs and for any staff member or student with a medical condition that prohibits the use of a mask. Additionally, masks can be removed for eating purposes and during physical education class. At the primary level, teachers will be able to utilize a clear mask during certain parts of their instructional day that will help with phonics and speech instruction, which is critical for early literacy development from PK - 2. Finally, mask breaks may also occur when students are outside, so teachers will be encouraged to coordinate their schedules to allow for this to occur when weather permits.
Speaking of the family survey and the learning plan options for your child/children, I have received several questions about movement between the hybrid and fully remote models. As I stated in the “Opt Out” letter, students that start the year in the fully remote model will not be able to transition back into in-person learning until the start of the second trimester. However, if a student starts the year in the hybrid model, parents will be able to request a change to transition their child to being fully remote at any time. If that change takes place, then the student will remain in the fully remote model for the remainder of the current trimester. A form for this purpose will be available later this month.

Although the remote learning experience was not ideal for anyone in any district during the spring, that time enabled administrators and teachers to learn and develop new skills that will be used for the year ahead. At or near the top of the list of concerns expressed to me in my previous and current position was the lack of consistency among teachers and instructional practices across grade levels. In order to address this issue, a group of teachers from both schools has been assembled to serve as a “Think Tank” for specific planning purposes. The goal of the Think Tank is to work with administration to create a structure that will include expectations for learning, schedules, weekly lessons, assignments and assessments. Ultimately, this information will be posted on the district’s website in a manner that makes it easier for families to access the details they need to know to support the teachers’ efforts and their child/children from home. Once this structure is in its final stage, parents from both schools who will be invited to help us test the structure for functionality.

I realize that this update probably did not resolve every issue that exists in the community at this time. However, please know that the administrative team and I are investing countless hours behind the scenes to develop, improve and finalize our plans for September. I would be remiss if I did not also recognize the efforts of the teachers and support staff that have played a BIG role in our reopening plans. The newly created Think Tank is a great example of the level of dedication that exists in this district among the teachers and is reflective of their desire to achieve the type of excellence that is expected in a district like Little Silver.

Finally, I believe that we will all make it through this difficult time as long as we continue to work together. In addition to the talented staff that I am still getting to know, I am grateful to have a supportive Board of Education that seems genuinely focused on doing what is best for kids. Thank you in advance for your continued patience and willingness to be as flexible as possible as we prepare for the new school year.

Respectfully,

Michael E. Ettore
Superintendent