



West Orange Public Schools
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Superintendent of Schools

J. Scott Cascone, Ed. D.

May 14, 2021

Dear West Orange Public School Families,

I hope this finds you well and enjoying this beautiful spring weather. I wanted to provide you with several updates and a few informational items.

School Reopening and Public Health Guidelines

As a reminder, on Monday, May 17th, the cohorts in grades 6 through 12 will be combined from four to two. By this time, building principals would have communicated relevant information and details regarding schedules and the like.

In the last week, a number of official and unofficial revised public health guidelines have been released pertaining to, amongst other things, occupancy limits, vaccination eligibility, and mask wearing requirements associated with vaccination. We are working in collaboration with the local Department of Health to understand these guidelines and how they may impact the school environment, staff, and students. We will stay apprised through the New Jersey Department of Health relative to any updates regarding mask wearing mandates for vaccinated versus unvaccinated individuals. Notwithstanding the CDC's recent advisory, no revised guidance has been issued from the New Jersey Department of Health relative to mask mandates in public schools. Therefore, until further notice, this mandate remains in place for both staff and students. Further, you should know that the Essex County Superintendents as well as superintendents from other county associations are now petitioning the state authorities to express the urgency for receiving timely guidance to inform our planning efforts for school reopening in the fall. I will certainly keep the community apprised as that information becomes available.

District Assessment Report

At Monday night's Board of Education meeting Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Ms. De Mendez, and I presented to the board and public an update on student assessment. The [assessment report](#) presented findings relative to student performance and progress this year, areas of focus for curriculum and instruction, and planned interventions and actions to be taken to bridge learning loss as well as for acceleration. [The presentation](#) starts at approximately the 39:00 minute-mark. I encourage you to take some time to review.

The data speaks to areas in which our students in the district performed quite well. It also reveals disproportionality that exists along demographic lines data which can and will help inform our goal setting in planning moving into next year and beyond. We must strive to understand the factors that contribute to these disparities. Further we must be intentional and strategic in identifying opportunities for organizational and systemic changes which will increase the efficiency and effectiveness with which we close the gaps. Acknowledging this is not an indictment of our system but simply a commitment to understand the phenomenon of achievement gaps and the children whom it impacts; gaps in equities which this pandemic has sadly widened.

What may also be observed, however, is evidence of a tremendous amount of effort and collaboration by the professional educators in this district. Not only have they engaged in the copious task of gathering and culling the statistics but also demonstrated fidelity to the ongoing administration of standards-based assessments amidst the most challenging of circumstances. Furthermore, what one sees is a concerted effort by our professional educators to be honestly and deliberately reflective and evaluative, down to the standard level, relative to areas where our students have been performing effectively and those which represent focus for present and future instruction. These conversations have occurred across grade spans through vertical articulations, informational insights which will be a great use to next year's teachers who receive the students.

The impact of this pandemic on student learning is definitive, the effects are neither unique nor limited to West Orange. What is perhaps unique about West Orange is that our district has been openly transparent with our community and has not sought to obscure what those impacts are. Rather we have and will continue to confront them head on, now and moving forward, for as long as the students remain with us in our district.

What one may also observe, is a school district, a professional staff and community that has stood in the gap against extraordinary challenges and has done an outstanding job of mitigating, to the greatest extent possible, learning loss. As such, our district has ensured that the gaps which have emerged are not insurmountable. Rather, starting with a robust finish the school year, targeted summer programming and the aspiration for a greater return to normalcy next year, I am confident that this district, the staff and, because of the unified and collective manner in which we approach the work this year, will be that much more committed and resolved in the work that is ahead of us.

Courtesy Bussing

Earlier in the week parents, guardians, and caretakers of students in grades 6 through 12 received a letter from Mrs. McFarland, the Director of Transportation, informing them of the removal of courtesy/hazardous busing for students in grade through 6 through 12 in the 2021-22 school year budget. This reduction was presented to the public at both the proposed budget meeting on March 18th and the final budget presentation on May 3rd. The letter served as a preliminary advisory; any families and students who will be impacted by this reduction will be advised directly as soon as possible. The district is in the process of updating the street directory to ensure that the information that is shared is accurate.

Snow Days

In previous correspondences I outlined that the two remaining snow or emergency days would be applied to the end of the school year for June 22nd and 23rd making June 21st the last day for students. I have since received feedback from various stakeholder groups and, in consultation with the Board of Education, am making the following adjustment to the dates for those GiveBack days. The first GiveBack day will remain for June 23rd, making the last day for students June 22nd. However, the second GiveBack day will be applied to Friday, May 28th, thus extending the Memorial Day holiday weekend. The district is happy to extend this holiday recess to afford our families an opportunity to spend time together and recharge in advance of the school year as we close out the month of June. The revised district calendar will be proposed for approval at the May 20th public Board of Education meeting and disseminated shortly thereafter.

I thank you in advance for your time and attention and wish you a restful weekend.

Sincerely,



J. Scott Cascone, Ed. D.
Superintendent