



Dear Livingston Public Schools Community:

I hope this letter finds everyone well. I read this statement at last night's Board of Education meeting regarding our decision to open the school year remotely:

Beginning with the release of *The Road Back* this past June, we have planned for every aspect of the reopening of schools. Guidance has shifted throughout the summer, most recently through a new executive order issued by Governor Murphy this past Wednesday, and new safety and health guidance from the Department of Health, which was released this past Thursday.

On July 24th, the Department of Education set out supplemental guidelines for school districts requiring that an all-virtual option for learning be offered for all students. This revised guidance underscored the need to consider the personal circumstances of each member of our school community, understanding that certain individuals may have increased risk factors and personal circumstances that would cause them to choose not to return to school for in-person schooling. *The Road Back* also guides school districts to work with staff members whose return to in-person learning may be similarly impacted. We have learned over the summer that a number of staff members throughout the district have health and family related issues that would enhance their risk and impede their ability to return to school in person. As of today, nearly 150 of our educators have indicated that they may need to take a leave of absence if we return to in-person learning. We have used a thorough process to sort through these requests, and our school physician has reviewed each submitted medical document.

Last Wednesday, the Governor issued an executive order allowing districts to open the school year remotely if there are specific concerns that would negatively impact the opening of school facilities. Since that order was released, multiple neighboring districts have announced that they will open the school year with remote learning. This trend has led to an increase in the number of our staff who are requesting child care leaves, which they are entitled to under federal law. A number of our staff members live in these surrounding communities.

The educators who have indicated they cannot return in person have years of experience, valuable content expertise, and knowledge of our curriculum and programs. In the current education job market, we simply cannot replace them. Livingston has developed its outstanding reputation based on the quality of the educational program that is provided for students. The people who are on the front line of that work are our teachers. In order to fulfill our mission, and provide our students with the best education possible, we need to engage our educators with our students. In addition to providing instruction, teachers contribute to supervision and safety in our schools. As a result, the potential loss of so many of our staff members presents both educational and safety challenges.

In line with the Governor's executive order, we believe that we would not be able to deliver our educational program effectively, or provide proper supervision and social distancing for our students with so many of our staff members not able to be present in our schools. It is simply not possible to overcome our significant staffing issues in time for the opening of the school year.

Therefore, we will be submitting a plan to the County Superintendent specifying that the Livingston Public Schools will be starting the school year with full remote learning on September 8th. We will remain in a full remote format until we are able to effectively engage our teachers and establish a setting that allows for in-person learning for students. Our “full-remote” learning plan will be posted to our website tomorrow and can be reviewed by members of our community. I will be briefly highlighting the plan in a few minutes. Please know that our full-remote learning plan has been reworked over this summer and outlines a revised and reimagined remote learning experience. The structure of our day will include a set schedule and increased synchronous interaction between students and teachers. By beginning the year virtually, we put the health and safety of our staff, students, and families as a top priority, and keep our talented educators connected with our students. It allows us to phase in to an even greater extent.

We will work to bring our students back to our school facilities as soon as we feel we can do so safely with appropriate staffing for each grade level. It is our hope that, before the end of September, we can undergo this process beginning with some of our special education programs and our youngest elementary school grade levels. We ultimately want to bring all grade levels back for in-person learning. Based on our current circumstances, this will be most challenging at the secondary level.

For all grades, we will make every effort to provide virtual and in-person extracurricular activities and orientation programs to connect our students with their schools and teachers. Our principals are currently looking for ways to bring groups of students to our school facilities to connect with staff, pick up materials, visit their schools, and socially connect with their peers. We will also focus our energy over the coming weeks on making the remote learning experience the best that it can be for our students and families, including targeted training for our staff.

We know that this pandemic has created an extremely difficult time for many in our community. We also understand that beginning the school year in an all-remote format will present some additional challenges to parents and families. We will continue to work with the West Essex YMCA and the JCC of Metrowest to help families find opportunities for childcare for those parents who must return to work.

When I arrived in Livingston a little over a year ago, I quickly discovered that this is a community that highly values education and provides our schools with tremendous support. The challenges of the past year have reinforced that, with strong partnerships between our schools and families, there is nothing we cannot overcome. Our team is anxious to face this most recent challenge, and to exceed expectations of remote learning to deliver the best educational experience possible for our students. We all want to have our students back in school, and we will continue working to get them back, but September 8th is quickly approaching and we need to move forward.

We cannot allow the present situation to undermine the strong connection between schools and families that has defined the success of the Livingston Public Schools for so many years. While this has been a long and exhausting crisis already, it will end, and we will be back together in our school facilities at some point in the future. Through this adversity, we must overcome the difficulties this struggle presents and work to strengthen our collective efforts to educate and support Livingston’s children during this difficult time.

We remain committed to our important work to help all learn, create, contribute, and grow in the healthiest and safest way possible.

More information will follow shortly both from the district and for individual schools. Please see our fully remote learning plan, which can be accessed through the following link and on our district website (www.livingston.org).

LPS Fully Remote Learning Plan:

<https://www.livingston.org/cms/lib/NJ01000562/Centricity/Domain/2376/Remote%20Learning%20Guide%20for%20Parents.pdf>

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew J. Block", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Matthew J. Block
Superintendent of Schools