

Dear Simsbury Parents/Guardians and Staff—

It has been two weeks since my last communication on school reopening, and, as promised, I want to bring you up to speed on the latest plans and procedures. Our Return to Simsbury Schools (RSS) Task Force and the entire administrative team have been digging into the State of Connecticut document that was released in late June and following up on the many requirements and guidelines outlined therein. As you know, our district conducted a survey of parents last week about their plans for sending students back to school, and I will share more about that process in this correspondence. Our Reopening Teaching and Learning Team has been holding meetings at various grade levels to prepare for all potential models of instruction: 1) a return to in-person schooling, 2) a hybrid model (some in-person schooling and some distance learning where about half the students attend on any given day), and 3) a full distance learning approach. Obviously, our goal is to achieve the first model — a return to in-person instruction — to the greatest extent possible. As the national conversation about school reopening has taken on added urgency over the course of the past week, I am extremely grateful that Connecticut, with arguably the best COVID-related public health data in the nation, can have this dialogue on completely different terms than some other regions of the country. We believe that our plans will indeed offer a safe return for both students and staff given current conditions, and we will continue to work tirelessly over the next six weeks to open our schools in a responsive and responsible manner.

It's clear that the questions and comments we are getting from the community fall into certain categories. As such, I am organizing this communication under those various buckets.

- Survey of Families — We had over 3700 responses to our initial survey about participation in our return to school plans, which represents a tremendous response rate given that our overall enrollment will be right around 4000 students this year. Thank you! With 76% of families responding affirmatively, the vast majority indicated that they do plan to send students back to school, and only 4% responded that they would definitely not send students back in the fall. That leaves about 20% of families who chose the “unsure” answer to the question, and principals have begun the process of reaching out to those families for further conversation. Many of the parents in this category are telling us that they want to continue to monitor Connecticut's public health data for a few more weeks before making a final decision.

This information is extremely helpful to us in our planning efforts. However, you can surely understand that we will need to get a greater level of clarity from the “unsure” respondents with time to make certain that our staffing levels and the physical set up of our schools and classrooms reflect the community's choices. Therefore, we will be following up with those families during the first week of August and will ask you to make a commitment by August 7th about your intentions. We believe that this is a reasonable timeline as it gives families almost another month to consider their choice and allows us about two weeks before the opening of school to make final adjustments.

- Next Steps for Simsbury — As many of you noted, the guidelines from the governor require districts to form their own plan by July 24th and to submit a document to the State Department of Education. We have already drafted a first response and are working with the full administrative team in two full-day meetings this week to finalize all the decisions and procedures that we can at this juncture. Next, the plan will be presented at the Board of Education's meeting on Tuesday, July 21st. Based on their feedback, we will make final

adjustments and present it to the community in my next COVID-related communication, which is scheduled for two weeks from today, July 29th.

- Distance Learning — We have the greatest clarity about what distance learning will look like at the elementary level. We believe that there will be enough families opting for a distance learning approach to allow us to form one cohort of students at each grade level across the five elementary schools and assign that group to a “virtual” classroom taught by a reassigned Simsbury teacher. The instructional goal of that delivery model will be 50% synchronous (real-time) instruction and 50% asynchronous.

For distance learning at the middle and high school levels, we are still planning the exact approach as the variety of classes and disciplines makes it much more challenging to create. It is more likely at the middle school level that we could create distinct 7th and 8th grade groups that take classes together for the most part. At the high school level, we are considering a variety of technology options that include the kind of instruction we offered last Spring through Google Meets as well as other means for “flipping” instruction through pre-made videos. In any event, our approach is likely to be fluid as we determine individual student needs and how they can be met efficiently.

- Health-Related Protocols — Perhaps the most frequent question we are getting right now is how we would handle a positive case of COVID-19 within the school environment. Please know that we have developed our protocols in conjunction with the Farmington Valley Health District (FVHD). In the event that we learn of a positive COVID-19 result from a student or staff member who has been in the building previously, my office will implement a short-term closure (2 to 5 days) of that school(s) for deep cleaning and a required consultation with the FVHD. This consultation period will allow for contact tracing and allow the FVHD to assess the COVID-19 impact in the school and/or district. Any decisions about a return to school will be made by my office only after consultation with the Director of the FVHD and the Board of Education.

Please know that the State Department of Education and the CT Department of Public Health are expected to release further guidance prior to the opening of school about responses to suspected or confirmed cases in the K-12 environment.

In terms of health screenings, the message for students and for staff will be reinforced frequently — STAY HOME IF YOU ARE SICK! Given the number of students and staff that would need to be monitored on a daily basis, we have been advised against temperature screenings, which are now viewed as a very inexact method for widespread screening. Parents and staff members will be asked to conduct a self-check before leaving for school for the day and should stay home with any COVID-19 symptoms (dry cough, sore throat, sudden loss of taste or smell) or with a temperature that exceeds 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

Furthermore, we cannot require, as some of you have suggested, that all school community members have a negative COVID-19 test before being allowed to return to school. Such a method is not feasible or advised by health experts since any negative test only represents that snapshot in time.

- Updates on Simsbury’s COVID Planning — Through our conversations, we have realized that it gives members of the school community both comfort and confidence when we share some of the efforts we have already made to procure resources to help in the mitigation of COVID-19. In

addition to a stockpile of PPE (including tens of thousands of masks), we have been in constant contact with our custodial/maintenance vendor, who has been able to supply hand sanitizer in bulk as well as cleaning equipment and disinfectant supplies. We have purchased 1000 separate desks for the elementary level, which will allow students to achieve social distancing in a way they surely couldn't at the tables and shared spaces in our current classroom setups. We have purchased self-standing sinks for those elementary classrooms that did not have any, and we are also investing in the plexiglass barriers that you have seen in other locations. None of this list even touches on the investment we continue to make in technology in the event that we do need to rely on a hybrid or distance learning model at some point over the course of time. Finally, we are also committed to additional personnel costs during the course of this year, related both to teaching/learning as well as additional needs for custodians and support in our health offices.

I'll close by thanking both the community and our staff members for their encouragement, open and honest communication, and continued patience. These are certainly remarkable times that create at least some anxiety for everyone; however, the prospect of opening the Simsbury Public Schools for the safe return of students and teachers is a huge source of optimism for me — and I trust for you too.

Sincerely,

Matt Curtis
Superintendent