

January 18, 2021

Dear South Orange and Maplewood community,

We have heard from our community members on all sides of the school reopening issue. I want to acknowledge the feelings and concerns you have expressed over the last few days regarding our reopening plan. I know your advocacy is rooted in a deep care for our community's families, educators and most importantly, our students.

Executive Order 175 states that School districts across the state "shall resume partial or full-time in-person instruction during the fall of school year 2020-2021." Per the walkthrough data shared with the Board this weekend, we have met the NJDOE requirements to reopen. Since the March 13th closure of school buildings, the district has been working towards an eventual reopening. We are excited to commence that process tomorrow.

I know a main concern some have on reopening is the current COVID infection rates. Per [covidactnow](#), Essex County is experiencing an active outbreak with 65.7 daily new cases per 100k residents, as of January 18th, 2021. One of the recommendations during an active outbreak is to close schools. However, we need to apply a local lens to the data. SOMA (or MapSO, your pick) represents approximately 5% of the total population of Essex County. We know the 65.7 per 100k case rate is not evenly distributed throughout the county. If it was, then all Essex County schools would be closed by their respective health departments due to community spread.

In my first conversation with the Superintendent as Board President, I stressed to him the need to ensure both town health officials felt comfortable telling us not to reopen if the health data pointed in that direction. I know they feel empowered to do so regardless of any external pressures to the contrary.

Our school building leaders have been working in innovative ways to be creative with available classroom space. Work has been ongoing this weekend and even today to improve our facilities from where they were on Friday afternoon in anticipation of a safe return to school on Tuesday. We also know that the district will continue improving additional spaces throughout the launch of Phase 3.

Since the summer, the board, superintendent, district staff and parent stakeholders have been working towards our reopening plan. The board realizes there has been some incorrect information given to families during this process, particularly when the community was led to believe we would be able to retrofit our ventilators with MERV-16 grade filters. We understand it will take some time to rebuild trust and one of my goals this year as Board President is to improve communication and transparency between the board, district and community. I look forward to continuing our work with the district, administration, principals and most of all, our teachers, in welcoming our students back to the classroom with warmth and love, even though we cannot hug right now.

In closing, I urge everyone to be diligent and continue wearing a mask, practicing social distancing and washing your hands. I encourage everyone to write to our state legislators [Codey](#), [Jasey](#) and [McKeon](#) to advocate for educators moving up the vaccine priority list. We will all get through this together.

Thank you. And for those asking, yes I'm still doing Dry January.

Regards,
Thair Joshua
Board President, South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education