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January 18, 2021

Hello SOMSD Family,

“The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.” ~ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I hope this message finds you and your families safe and healthy as we reflect on the life and contributions of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As a fellow graduate of Morehouse College, I feel tremendous pride and joy on this day.

As you can imagine, we have been busily preparing for the return of students to school for Phase 3 of our District Reopening Plan. We understand that for some in our District and community-at-large, anxiety is high and there is concern around ‘if’ our District should reopen now. We understand and acknowledge that these feelings are natural and represent a personal truth.

Please know that we as District Leaders rely on the science and data available to us (and our Health Professionals and Department of Health) to guide us in our decision making. The information in the chart below represents an update from the New Jersey Department of Health. As per the school guidance from NJDOH, when in Orange which is a high risk level, the NJDOH states that schools can proceed with caution into in person learning. Our nursing and administrative staff are aware of the guidance and many efforts have been made to ensure PPE, prompt removal of any ill staff or students, consistent communication regarding quarantine and isolation, and return to school procedures are in place.

Table 1: COVID-19 Activity Level Index (CALI) ^{6a}					Table 2: COVID-19 Activity Level Index (CALI) ^{6b}		
	Value	Case Rate ³	Percent CLI ⁴	Percent Positivity ⁵	Legend	Final Activity Level	CALI Score
Low	1	< 1	< 1.68%	< 3 %		Low	1
Moderate	2	1-10	1.68 - 5.51%	3-10 %		Moderate	2
High	3	10.01-25	5.52 - 13.08%	10.01-20 %		High	3
Very High	4	> 25	> 13.08%	> 20%		Very High	4

We also utilize available scholarly research to look for trends that can guide us. Here is the link to a recent example... [Three new studies in the US and Europe](#) confirmed the extremely low risk of virus spread in schools, especially between pupils and instructors. The New York Times recently published an article regarding the variant of Covid-19 that most of us have heard about. This article speaks directly about schools and the impact of the new strain. Ultimately, the article asserts that mitigation

efforts are effective against this strain ... “requiring masks for all children and staff; ensuring adequate ventilation in schools, even if just by opening windows or teaching outdoors; maintaining distance between students, perhaps by adopting hybrid schedules; and hand hygiene.”

- <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/14/health/coronavirus-variant-schools.html>

We have prepared a detailed video update regarding Phase 3 [Link: https://youtu.be/mV_afMMAqoU], as a part of this message. However, as a preface to that message, we believe it is important to answer specific community questions and concerns that we have been made aware of.

HVAC/Ventilation system update

It is important for everyone to know that classroom univents were not designed to prevent the spread of illnesses. That would require hospital grade units. Some of the inquiries that we have received are asking our units to do something they were never designed to do. Please remember, that our District has been on record that our facilities require renovation including the replacement of HVAC systems and temperature controls. It is well documented that District classrooms vary in temperature and the only solution is to replace these systems. In June of 2019 the District approved a Long Range Facility Plan and was authorized to raise funds in the amount of \$160 million to remove portable classrooms, replace HVAC systems, address facility health and safety concerns, and add instructional space. Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic arrived shortly after receiving approvals.

What is the District doing to keep schools safe?

The CDC guidelines for operating schools during COVID-19 state that schools should consider several strategies to encourage behaviors to reduce the spread of COVID-19 such as hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, masks, social distancing, signs, cleaning and disinfection as well as ventilation scenarios.

Signage is placed throughout the buildings reminding everyone to wear PPE, wash hands and social distance. Hand sanitizing stations were installed in classrooms and hallways. PPE was purchased for staff and students. Plexi-glass barriers are installed in offices and some classrooms (i.e., science labs). The District continues to perform maintenance on all HVAC units, which include cleaning the unit, repairing the motors if needed, and installing new filters. Areas that do not have mechanical units are documented to ensure faculty knows to open windows.

The goal is to keep students, faculty, administration and everyone who uses our buildings safe. While we know it is impossible to create a “COVID proof” environment in our schools, the District is following guidance to maintain diligent hygiene, social distancing, PPE usage and improving air quality to the fullest extent possible.

The District commissioned architects to inspect units and invited staff on these building visits to ensure everyone is aware of the work that was completed and the remaining areas that work still needs to be completed.

An important caveat that you will see in our presentation is that during Phase 3 some of our school buildings will have as few as 70 students in their daily cohort. *Our normal district enrollment is more than 7,000 students, but on a daily basis during Phase 3 we are expecting no more than 800 students in our schools at a single time.* This reduction in capacity and density represents our caution, but also our commitment to engage the most vulnerable students in our community.

Why are Teachers who do not have students in place being asked to broadcast from the school buildings?

With school starting buildings opening for the first time in 10 months, during our discussions with our Principals we agreed that we should have an all-hands-on-deck approach to begin this start to ensure that we have adequate coverage and support for our students (and fellow teachers). We will monitor this and determine if it is necessary after we have established a firm footing with opening. Additionally, understanding the challenges of our current circumstances, teachers have the option of leaving their school sites when students are dismissed and completing their virtual tour of duty from home if they so choose.

Some have said that teachers and school employees with health challenges are being denied protection or leave.

Our District's HR Department shared with all staff the updated 504 process. In this virtual interactive process our HR Director and Board Attorney review and discuss challenges with the employees who have submitted a request. If the request is medical in nature, our School Physician reviews each request and advises the district of his determination. Many times reasonable accommodations are available for the employee.

You are stating that we are safe to open, but some in the community have heard concerns from staff around opening, including that some spaces are not meeting the standards of the New Jersey Educational Association (NJEA). How can that be?

We love and respect our teachers and have had a positive relationship with their bargaining unit SOMEA. But the answer to this question is that the NJEA standards do not represent those put forward by the New Jersey Department of Education nor the mandates represented in Governor Murphy's Executive Order 175. We of course aim for the highest of standards, but as we stated, our buildings are due for extensive improvements and expansion because of the challenges that have been discussed in public meetings very often and in many cases won't be able to meet these standard until the completion of our planned Long Range Facility Plan (LRFP).

Thank you for your time and attention, we hope you find this information and our video update informative and assuring.

Yours in education,

Dr. Ronald G. Taylor
Superintendent of Schools