

Good afternoon Westampton School families,

For those of you that I have not met, I am Anthony Petruzzelli, the Superintendent of Schools here in Westampton. If you look back on your emails and text messages from a year ago, it seems like it was a lifetime ago. To say that it has been a remarkable year is truly the greatest of understatements.

And yet, the decisions that we are making for our schools have remained the same for many months. How much can we open? How many students can we bring back? How do we keep everyone safe while doing all we can for learning? How do we help staff members deal with circumstances of their own children being remote from their school?

You watch the same news that I do and you see the same data. There are so many positive signs and yet still so many warnings. There is a temptation to make decisions based on my own interpretation of what the data is saying. However, my decisions for the safety and health of our staff, students, and community have to stay grounded in the guidance from the CDC, the State of New Jersey, the Burlington County Department of Health, and our own school nurses. So, today I wanted to talk to you about our next steps.

Before I start, I want and need to say thank you. This community has responded so incredibly well to this crisis. Never would you have thought that you would have been put in the position that you have been, supporting instruction the way you have been asked. Your efforts have been nothing short of heroic. Our teachers, principals, and staff have recreated what schooling is, virtually overnight. Their efforts have been spectacular and we all owe them a great deal of gratitude. But parents and other caregivers cannot be left out of that praise. For my part and on behalf of the board of education and every staff member in Westampton Township Schools, I applaud and thank you.

So what is next? There are several things that need our attention simultaneously. We need to use the next 5 months to do all we can to minimize any learning gaps that have occurred over the last year. We need to continue to look to see how much more we can safely open schools to in-person learning, and we want to make sure that any choices we offer you are based on the best information available.

First, many of you will be hearing about our Academic Recovery Plan. Each school has established a plan for the best use of resources to identify and address any significant learning gaps, with a goal that all students are as ready for next September, as close as possible to how they would be if the pandemic never happened. This will include some small group interventions during the school day, some after school tutoring, and some summer programs. Each school has slightly different plans that will roll out over the next few months.

Second, we need a plan for the remainder of the school year. There are several things to consider as we make this plan. One is busing – transporting students and ensuring safe

distance means that our buses are running at less than half capacity and we do not have the means to double the number of bus routes. Another issue is distancing in classrooms. With our current model, we have been able to confidently adhere to the recommended 6 feet of distance between students. If we wish to bring more students back for more days, this will quickly become an issue. A third issue is guidance. The Burlington County Department of Health has been extraordinary in helping us interpret the guidance from the State of New Jersey and the CDC. However, that guidance often leaves too much room for interpretation. For example, a guideline that says “space desks at least six feet apart where feasible”. It’s that “where feasible” that is the challenge. If we bring everyone back every day, it is not feasible. If we use a cohort system, it is feasible. It is being interpreted differently by different people. It is important to realize that, although cases are trending well, the guidance has not changed. I am not a medical professional and will continue to rely on health professionals and not my interpretation of the data.

Our goal has always been to provide the best possible instruction while doing everything we can to keep our staff, students, and community safe. To date, while we have had many students and staff that have contracted COVID-19, we have not had one case of school based transmission. We intend to do all we can to keep it that way.

Since the key to what we can do with in-person learning is the number of students returning, it is critical that we ask you to commit to your child’s status for the last marking period. We have currently been allowing students to return from a remote setting on the first of each month. Since returning with only a few days left wouldn’t make much sense, we essentially only have two of those opportunities left – April 1 and May 1. With Spring Break starting on April 2, the April start date is essentially April 12. So, we are collapsing the April 1 and May 1 opportunity into one return date option of Monday, April 12, the first day after spring break.

If your child is fully remote, you will be receiving a survey this week asking you to commit to the remainder of the year. The choices will be clear – either you are remaining fully remote for the remainder of the school year, or you will come back to in-person learning on April 12 either in a 2 day per week cohort system or a 4 day/week system.

After we get everyone’s commitment for the 4th marking period, we will be able to plan. We will see if we can offer a 4-day per week option for all in-person learning or if we can only safely offer the hybrid model of 2 days per week. The survey will close next Friday, March 12. We need the time between then and spring break to analyze and plan. There will be busing issues and class size issues that will let us know which plan we can offer.

For those of you currently coming in 4 days per week, your programs will continue. For those currently coming in two days per week, we will notify you if we are moving to 4 days per week before spring break. We will have to continue to have a shortened in-person day without lunch being served for the remainder of this school year.

Please be on the lookout for the survey if you are currently fully remote. For everyone else please be patient, when we know our numbers, we will look to open as much as possible, while being as safe as possible.

Finally, I want to assure you that we are going to do this right. We won't lose focus on the quality of instruction that all of our students deserve, remote and in-person, and we won't lose focus on keeping our educational community as safe as possible.

Thank you and stay safe.