Coronavirus and Continuity of Education: The Board’s Role

Most School Board members are aware that the Governor, in consultation with the Commissioner of the Maine Department of Education, has indicated that she plans to waive the compulsory attendance requirements of Title 20-A, chapter 211 and rules regarding compulsory attendance, including the minimum number of school days. School units that receive Board approval for their Continuity of Learning Plan—the plan for providing remote/distance learning during this prolonged emergency period of school closure—will receive this waiver.

The Continuity of Learning Plan reflects the expectation that the school unit will be replacing in-classroom instruction with remote/distance learning for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.

The school unit does not have to submit the plan itself—just the approved minutes of the School Board meeting at which the plan is approved. While sharing the plan with the MDOE is optional, your school unit’s plan may provide inspiration and some welcome guidance to others who are in the process of refining their plans. However, the approved minutes must be received by the MDOE prior to the waiver to be granted.

Why Board involvement? In her March 27, 2020, Priority Notice, Commissioner Makin described public education as “a covenant between the schools and the communities they serve here in Maine.” In its oversight role, the Board is ultimately responsible for the operations of the schools, including the delivery of instruction, in the school unit it governs. The Board’s role in approving the continuity of education plan is keeping the covenant through its endorsement of the school unit’s plan for providing meaningful, structured, and productive learning opportunities, albeit in a nontraditional way.

The Continuity of Learning Plan is typically a collaborative effort involving school administrators, professional staff with grade level and content area expertise, and other relevant personnel. What should a board be looking for in the plan it is being asked to approve? **Plans will vary widely, depending on the grade levels in the school system, access to technology (not just devices but all aspects of “connectivity”), and other factors.** On the whole, though, boards want to be assured that:

- there is a structure for providing learning opportunities that support the content areas of the Learning Results, with use of online learning platforms and take-home work, as appropriate to grade levels and appropriate technology and resources
- there are means of providing for direct individual student-teacher interaction (e.g., email, phone call, online “office hours”)
- the plan takes into consideration provisions for supporting students with IEPs and/or 504 plans, students who are English language learners, and students in gifted and talented programs
- there is an explanation of how student learning will be assessed and how students will be graded during the period of school closure
- the needs of high school seniors have been taken into consideration (e.g., how it will be determined whether graduation requirements have been met, calculation of GPA, final transcript)
- student mental health is supported.

Your Board may have other, or additional, considerations. However, getting a plan approved is of immediate concern.
By now, teachers and guidance counselors typically have a good idea of whether a student is in danger of failing a course, not rising to the next grade level, or not meeting the requirements for graduation. Hopefully, the school principal, guidance counselor, or other designated person has communicated this to the student and his/her parents and informed them of opportunities to make up their deficiencies by the end of the school year or over the summer.

Also, school administrators may want to give some thought as to how high school students can go about planning their courses and schedules for the upcoming school year.

MSMA has been asked on occasion whether a Board should revise any of its policies in light of the coronavirus crisis and all that it entails. **We recommend NOT revising policies simply to accommodate the present situation.** Instead, we recommend that the Superintendent, school leadership, teachers, and other professional staff engage in a collaborative process to develop an effective PLAN for continuity of learning and bring it to the Board for its approval. The plan is dynamic and can be amended, if there is a need to do so.

We recognize that many boards like to put procedures and plans online and, depending on the structure of the school unit’s website, may be “hooking” procedures and plans to underlying policies. If your Board wishes to do this, the Board may want to consider a code such as EBCE-E (as an exhibit accompanying EBCE, School Closures and Cancellations) for its Continuity of Learning Plan.

When the crisis is over, and we return to “normal,” school administrators and the Board may want to assess the success of the Continuity of Learning Plan and its adaptability or other situations requiring school closures beyond the typical “snow day.”

**And now, looking to the future . . .**

In response to coronavirus, and with guidance from the Department of Education, Maine school units are taking a variety of approaches to grading, calculation of GPAs, honor rolls and other issues related to student academic standing and whether a student has qualified for a high school diploma. School administrators and school personnel are all intensely engaged finding effective solutions to what we all hope will be a situation that, terrible as it is, will be resolved before the start of the 2020-2021 school year, or that we will at least have made enough progress to enable schools to reopen.

Throughout the proficiency-based diploma controversy which culminated in the enactment of LD 985, *An Act To Maintain High School Diploma Standards by Repealing Proficiency-based Diploma Standards and Adding the Equivalent in Standards Achievement* (signed by the Governor June 5, 2019), MSMA has been asked for a sample policy that would be adaptable to all school units with high schools, whether they favored a diploma based on proficiency, a more traditional approach, or a “hybrid” system. We have also been asked, on numerous occasions, for a sample policy on grading and reporting.

Since educators tend to be optimists, and it’s never too early to plan for the next school year, we offer a revised policy [IKF, Graduation Requirements](#), and a new [IKAB, Grading and Reporting of Student Progress](#). Please click on the links to see these policies. They are in Word for ease of editing.

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**Please Note:** The contents of MSMA sample policies and other resource materials do not necessarily reflect official Association policy. They are intended neither for verbatim replication nor to replace the advice of the local board’s legal counsel. MSMA recommends a careful analysis of the need and purpose of any policy and a thorough consideration of the content’s application and suitability to the individual school system. Rarely does one board’s policy serve exactly to address the concerns and needs of all units. Sample policies are most appropriately used as a basis or beginning for a board’s policy development on specific topics.