

FALL RIVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"The Scholarship City"

417 Rock Street, Fall River, MA 02720

Matthew H. Malone, Ph.D., Superintendent

March 13, 2020

Dear Leader,

We currently are living in a time of incredible stress, anxiety, and fear of what we cannot control. This can heighten our emotions and inability to maintain a normal sense of calm and daily order. But not here in the Fall River Public Schools. In this spirit, I want to thank you for your solid, steady, and professional leadership of faculty, staff, parents, and of course, students, through uncharted waters – always keeping their needs at the center of your decisions. I have done my very best to communicate openly and honestly over the past few weeks with the most accurate and up-to-date information possible with regard to the COVID-19 crisis and, in particular, our district-wide threat of exposure.

Earlier today (3/13/20), the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, under the joint leadership of the Executive Office of Education (EOE) and Executive Office of Health and Human Services (HHS), held a joint conference call led by Commissioner Riley from Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and Commissioner Bahrel from Department of Public Health Commission (DPH), to provide unified guidance on recommended school district response to the virus. The goal of the meeting was to disseminate clear guidance to schools in an effort to prevent and reduce the spread of COVID-19. Presently in Massachusetts, we have 108 presumed cases and 6 confirmed cases of COVID-19, yet, we do not have any confirmed cases in Bristol County. There are 1083 Massachusetts residents who have been directed to quarantine by medical professionals for a host of reasons, and of these, 638 people have completed their quarantine and have been cleared to return to normal daily activity. Our current exposure risk threat remains low as there is no evidence of "sustained community transmission".

I am announcing now that the Fall River Public Schools will be staying open for the foreseeable future. This decision was made following careful consideration of the information and guidance provided by DPH and DESE – the science behind the virus, the practical needs of our students and our community, and the best recommendations of our healthcare professionals. As such, please share the following very important information with your faculty, staff, and families:

1. Effective this evening, we will launch a new Continuity of Learning Operations Plan – one that will be posted on our district webpage. This tool will be blended in availability of resources, providing students with two weeks of online and consumable learning activities, K-12, in all content areas, and including resources and guidance for English learners and students with disabilities. This tool will remain in place for the remainder of the school year and updated on an ongoing basis by our content and classroom experts. This tool will be our contingency default learning plan, no matter the unpredicted scenarios that occur following this date.
2. DESE will no longer track chronic absenteeism as of March 2nd. This means that schools and the district will not be held accountable for students' absences contributing to chronic absenteeism after March 2nd. I have also directed principals that no student should fail a course for the term or the year based on absenteeism after this date, as long as they complete all of their missed assignments. In addition, we will no longer require doctors' notes to waive an absence. If a child is sick, they need to stay home until fever free for 24 hours.
3. DESE will require all schools to meet a minimum of 180 student learning days, and no more than their previously scheduled 185th day. However, no matter what, no school will be required to remain open beyond June 30, 2020.
4. Spring sports will begin with tryouts on March 30th. Large gatherings will be reviewed on a case by case basis. The guidance is that school-based gatherings are allowed (lunch, assembly, etc.), but events involving people from outside of the school community are discouraged. Schools should examine lunch procedures on a case-by-case basis and alter plans as possible.

5. If parents wish to keep their children at home they will do so at their own discretion. I do not encourage this, but I understand it, and I am asking those parents who make this decision to encourage the use of the resources within our Continuity of Learning Operations Plan to ensure cognitive engagement of their students. Said assignments will be submitted by parents and students to their classroom teachers, either electronically or in person.

In addition, DESE has released the following information: "Coronavirus cases seem, at this time, to be isolated geographically, and in fact, we are hearing that many schools are not experiencing any issues. That, however, does not mean that the virus will not accelerate to other areas of the state, if it hasn't already. At this time, the administration is not asking for a statewide closure, but that could change in the future as circumstances change. In that context, I would like to provide some updated guidance from DESE:

- DESE is suspending all monitoring and onsite assistance visits, except in a few special circumstances. We want you to focus on what matters most, which is keeping your students and staff safe. If you want our assistance, we will be happy to provide it virtually.
- We are looking to determine whether the April 1 deadline for submission of the Student Opportunity Act plans can be extended. This deadline is state law, so we will need to work with legislature.
- We have not made any changes to the MCAS testing schedule at this time, but we reserve the right to extend or move the assessment windows or take other action as needed. For example, we are looking into the 10th grade ELA test and will get more information to you as soon as we can.
 - There may be an opportunity for a one-year assessment and accountability waiver from the federal government, but even if that is granted, we would need legislative relief from our state legislature to waive the state law around the testing requirement.
- The MIAA has canceled all winter sporting events scheduled for this weekend.
- We hope to send a letter to districts that they can share with families about the coronavirus.

Internally, we have continued to clean our buildings, our touch points, and hard surfaces on a daily basis. I have provided overtime for work as needed in larger open areas. I have also approved our ability to call in outside cleaning expertise if the situation warrants it. Our School Committee has approved additional deep cleaning apparatus and we have placed orders to stockpile soap, hand sanitizer, and tissues. Our bus company has also increased their cleaning protocols on a daily basis.

We will continue to provide food service, breakfast and lunch, every day. In the event of closure, we are formulating a plan to follow USDA guidelines to serve food to our students. We will monitor large group gatherings and the rental of facilities from outside groups. Essentially, inside events are on but we will limit outside usage and outside gatherings in our schools on a case by case basis.

Our faculty and staff are the backbone of our organization. I know you have questions and concerns. At the present time, we will stay open and we - our students, our colleagues, and I personally - need you in school. If you are sick, stay home; if not, we remain open and I will expect you to be at work.

Finally, this is a fluid situation beyond any normal operating standards that any of us are accustomed to. I ask that you stay calm and stay human. Let's continue to communicate openly and honestly and be transparent in our actions. It is likely that our current decision to remain open may change in the near future based on more information. However, we are prepared now for any scenario that may present itself and our team is the best in the business in dealing with uncertainty. The best advice I can leave you with is Latin, "Semper Gumby", meaning "always flexible". We will stay flexible, we will stay nimble and we will respond as we must. I appreciate your patience and your flexibility.

Cordially,

Dr. Matthew Malone



Superintendent of Schools