

Dear Administration, Faculty, Staff and Parents/Guardians,

As you know, our schools and programs started out this school year on fully remote instructional schedules, but opened on October 19th to on-site instruction of students in hybrid schedule of part-time attendance and/or shortened school days. Our hope and plan were to work our way up, in terms of how long on-site instruction was provided each day and eventually to increase the number of days each student could safely attend school on-site. These hybrid on-site schedules (as well as the fully-remote programs for students who have not yet returned on-site) have worked well to date due to continued high levels of commitment and creativity from our administrators, faculty and staff, and outstanding collaboration from our students and their families at home.

As the levels of COVID-19 infection and transmission have increased, in our local communities and throughout the state, over the last two months a combination of solid school safety practices and good fortune have kept our schools and programs relatively free from infection, “close contacts” and the disruptions they bring. Over the last two weeks, however, that tide has turned for us. As of Friday, November 20th, we have seen over ten cases of COVID-19 infection in students or staff members in various BCSS locations. These have resulted in five different programs or locations shutting down some or all on-site instruction in favor of fully-remote teaching for 14-day quarantines or longer. These are on top of the steady daily stream of individual student and staff member quarantines required because people both experienced COVID-19 symptoms and needed to seek medical involvement, or were in “close contact” with others who tested positive for COVID-19 outside of work. Our decisions to quarantine individuals and to suspend on-site program operations are made in consultation with the Bergen County Department of Health Services (“BCDHS”) and/or in accordance with that office’s guidance, so that we are balancing students’ educational needs with individual and community health concerns as well as we can.

The challenge of covering large numbers of unplanned staff and student absences, the invisibility and high contagiousness of COVID-19 itself, and the fact that COVID-19 “numbers” are increasing both inside and outside our schools and programs, however, are all factors weighing against on-site instruction staying open in the near-term. Our district is unique because we receive students from almost every town in Bergen County, as well as towns in more than six other counties. We also send those students back home to each of those towns at the end of the day. On a level that local school districts cannot, our operational decisions can impact public health throughout Bergen County and across a large swath of northeastern New Jersey. We already know that COVID-19 infection and transmission rates are rising. We also know that we are approaching holidays in November and December that not only bring their own disruptions to teaching and learning, but also come with traditions of family and other gatherings that will add more challenges to the protection of public health.

Based on all these factors, as well as the perspective expressed by the Director/Health Officer for the Bergen County Department of Health Services, and in consultation with County Executive Tedesco, I have decided to close all Bergen County Special Services

programs operating in BCSS locations to on-site instruction, effective Monday, November 30, 2020 through at least Friday, January 15, 2021. BCSS staff working in consultant-model programs and in host school locations will continue to follow the calendars and instructional schedules of those schools.

Instructional and student support programs for students in BCSS locations will operate fully remotely for students, faculty, and staff from November 30th through January 15th. We will continuously monitor internal dynamics (e.g., student learning, student and staff attendance, social-emotional well-being, etc.) as well as community health conditions, and I will share updates with everyone periodically. We will assess the viability of resuming on-site instruction after the start of the New Year and communicate a formal decision prior to January 15th.

I understand the frustration some in our school community will feel about this decision. Students should be in school; and I know that the disruptions to learning, mental health and family needs resulting from fully-remote instruction are substantial. We will do everything we can to continue developing the breadth and rigor of our remote student engagement; and we will do everything possible to get students back into our schools as soon as we can do so with reasonable safety...for our students and their families, for our staff and their families, and for our shared communities.

Thank you, as always, for your energy, flexibility, and commitment to excellence. With continued teamwork, we will not only “manage” this situation but find new ways to grow from it.

If parents/guardians have any specific questions regarding a school schedule, please contact the building administration.

Stay safe and be well,
Howard Lerner, Ed.D.
Superintendent