

OCEAN CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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“Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence.” – Helen Keller

That quote grabbed me this week, because it has been a year since the pandemic forced us to close our doors. The School Board and I have spent every day since hoping we would be able to reopen fully and keep our students and staff safe. We have had confidence in our district leadership and staff to make that happen. Now, we are pleased to share that this hope and confidence have led us to our next major achievement.

Recently, a few indicators have shown that we can **move to five days of in-person learning for grades 7-12. We will adjust plans for those grades starting April 12.**

In grades 7 and 8, both cohorts O and C will combine and return to school for five full days a week starting April 12. The district will work to keep 6 feet of social distance where possible, particularly at lunch, but in some classes, students may be spaced closer to 3 feet apart. Although we will not be able to always maintain 6 feet of distance between each student in classrooms for grades 7-8, we are working on room modifications to possibly increase space between them. Please know that all students will wear masks, face forward and have plexiglass barriers around their desks like those used in other Intermediate School classrooms and throughout the Primary School.

At the High School in grades 9-12, cohorts O and C will combine and return, together, on April 12. Students will attend for five early dismissal days a week, following their present schedule. We will work to adhere to 6 feet of social distance where practicable. However, there are classes in which students will be as close as 3 feet or slightly less. Presently, we are determining the feasibility of moving these classes to larger areas. We will continue with an early dismissal schedule at our High School, because we cannot space our students 6 feet apart during lunch when masks are off. We will monitor many factors to determine when we can take the next step to have High School students eat lunch in school.

Several factors contributed to the decision to combine cohorts in grades 7-12:

- Just last week, a pivotal study was released in Infectious Diseases Society of America examining Massachusetts statewide K-12 and staff COVID-19 case rates. Data and study results show that lower physical distancing policies can be adopted in school settings with masking mandates without negatively impacting student or staff safety.
- As a district that prioritizes mental health, we aim to provide our students with a more familiar routine, as we know that the consistency and reliability that come with a routine are key for mental health and wellness.
- At the federal level, there is a strong directive that our schools should be prioritized for reopening as the number of vaccinated Americans rises and COVID-19 cases decline.
- The April 12 return date gives our educators and school staff about a month to schedule and receive the COVID-19 vaccine after becoming a priority group for vaccinations on March 15.
- The Cape May County Department of Health reported that the County had a 3.9% positivity rate from tests performed March 6. This marks the first time the County has been below 4% since Nov. 4.

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- The Rate of Transmission for COVID-19 continues to decrease in the County, meaning the spread of the virus is currently declining.
- Given the most recent data showing less community spread, County health officials indicated that they would accept plans for review that help prioritize students' return to school with thoughtful health and safety precautions in place – even if all recommended COVID-19 mitigation measures cannot always be followed.

We now await final approval of our plans by the New Jersey Department of Health and the New Jersey Department of Education, and we expect to hear back in advance of the April 12 transition date.

Please note that after we make that transition, we must continue to remain flexible to adjust to the possibility of rising cases of COVID-19 in our schools and/or community. That may include targeted closings for periods of recommended quarantines. Therefore, it is imperative that we continue to follow health and safety guidelines to protect ourselves against the virus.

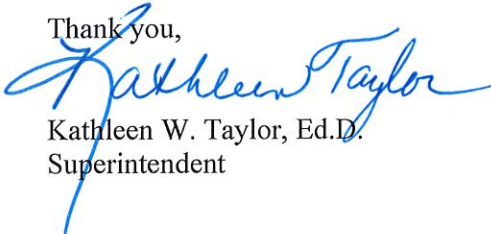
The concern remains that entire classes in grades 7-12 are at risk for periods of quarantine, because these classes will not be able to have students spaced 6 feet apart. As mentioned in previous letters, the guidelines for contact tracing have not – and are not expected to – change. A close contact is anyone within 6 feet of distance for 15 minutes or more of someone who has symptom(s) or tested positive. We weighed this risk and believe that it is lower now that community spread is trending downward.

You continue to have our Virtual Academy as an option for your child if you feel more comfortable with fully remote learning over the new plan. Parents wishing to make this switch should contact your child's guidance counselor. If you have questions about your child's schedule and school's plan, please contact your child's Principal.


Since September, 91% of OCSD students have opted for our in-person learning plan. In the High School alone, we've had nearly 90% of students choose in-person learning. Those percentages are significantly higher than many districts throughout this state, which is why we have had to take a more cautious approach, at times, to resuming full-time, in-person schooling. So many of our students want to be with us. Our classrooms are full, and that is a testament to both our exceptional educators and the value our community places on education.

Thank you for your trust and understanding as our district has worked as a team, dedicated for a year now to helping our students return to our classrooms safely and responsibly.

Thank you,



Kathleen W. Taylor, Ed.D.
Superintendent



Joseph S. Clark
Board of Education, President