
3-27-20 COVID-19 Update

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Dear Westport Families,

I hope that you and your loved ones are safe and healthy, as we all deal with what increasingly looks like a long-term challenge. This Friday Update includes information on our Distance Learning Plan as well as specific information from the Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE).

ZOOM - A number of parents have inquired as to why we do not use ZOOM for instructional purposes. The answer is that ZOOM is not on the state's approved list. ZOOM has not signed on to the state requirement that distance learning providers, and all vendors for that matter, adhere to the requirements that exist under the State's Data Privacy Law. The State, through its Commission on Technology, is trying to convince ZOOM to comply. I am hoping that they are successful - and soon. We use Google Meet, which allows us to do everything that ZOOM does - and in some cases more; however, it would be preferable to have another well-considered platform available for use.

State Testing - As per Executive Order from Governor Lamont, the SDE has waived all testing requirements for the current school year.

Grading – Given the fact that when school closed, we were deep into third quarter, which ends April 3, Bedford Middle School (BMS) and Staples will issue third quarter grades. At the elementary school progress reports have been completed and will be sent out during the next week or so. Given the dramatic changes in the educational program, as well as the stress associated with the impact of COVID-19, we are in the process of deciding whether to move to an alternative grading system for the remainder of the school year. Particularly at the high school level, if we move to an alternate grading system, we want to be careful not to disadvantage our students in any way. Toward that end, we have been in touch with comparable high schools in the area, as well as districts in the Tristate area, who are also working this issue.

Distance Learning

On a Pre-K-12 basis we are working on Phase 2 of our Distance Learning Plan, by updating our programs with the objective of providing a more structured schedule for students and teachers. Our updated plans will accommodate some of the flexibility associated with our current schedules and will also add the structure and consistency, which will allow for more frequent opportunities for interactive learning. These changes will also help with better pacing in terms of the amount of work expected by students, and teachers alike.

At Stepping Stones, our Preschool program, we have been working to refine our remote learning program, with an updated launch to begin this Monday, March 30. This increased focus on visual learning will make use of videos, in a variety of ways, including video coaching with parents, whereby parents will be able to watch teachers and therapists interact with their children - toward the goal of strengthening the school-home learning connection.

At the elementary schools, our updated distance learning plan will also begin Monday, March 30. Earlier today, the Elementary Principals and Dr. Buono sent detailed information regarding program changes. The

two-half days that we devoted to planning for this transition have been invaluable, and we thank you for your understanding in supporting this effort.

Our updated program at Bedford Middle School (BMS) will begin on Monday, April 6, which is the first day of fourth quarter. The new BMS schedule structure will allow for the greater use of interactive learning. BMS Families will receive a detailed description of the BMS Distance Learning Plan, with schedules, early next week.

Yesterday, Staples rolled out its new schedule. The new A-B schedule includes four classes in the mornings (8:30-12:15) on alternate days, with afternoon (12:15-3:00) opportunities that may include extra-help or student-teacher meetings. The updated Staples schedule is designed to provide more interactive educational experiences, a return to the routines that students are used to, and assist with the pace of instruction.

During the period of school closure, we will be implementing some of your children's education through group video conferencing using *Google Meet*. These services may be provided in a group setting with multiple students participating in the video conference. Student names and video images will be visible to the teacher and other participating students. Parents are encouraged to have their students participate via a location that is quiet and free of distractions to the extent possible. Other individuals in the home are not permitted to participate in or be visible on the video conference, or otherwise observe the lesson, other than reasonable adult supervision of the student. Parents and students are prohibited from recording video conferencing sessions. In order to support teachers in their efforts to provide interactive learning opportunities for their students, it is important that everyone comply with relevant Board of Education policies, including but not limited to Board Policy #5125 (Confidentiality and Access to Education Records) and the Acceptable Use Agreement: Intranet/Internet that parents and students have signed previously. The Westport Board of Education's policies can be accessed at: <http://z2policy.cabe.org/cabe/Z2Browser2.html?showset=westport>

Going Forward

There are a variety of ways that we can provide excellent education, within a distance learning framework. These strategies include virtual classrooms (synchronous learning), posting lessons with individual or small group follow-up, pre-recorded videos, google chats, and collaborative documents, as well as a host of possibilities that I'm learning about - that many of our teachers already use, or they are learning to use through professional learning that we are providing.

We will not mandate "stand and deliver lessons" taught by everyone at the same time for the same amount of time. While we are encouraging the use of interactive teaching approaches, and have redesigned our distance learning plan to allow teachers to do so, in the final analysis we will rely on our teachers to use their training and professional judgment to make the best decisions on behalf of their students. We will rely on our administrators - principals, assistant principals and coordinators to support and supervise our teachers, and when necessary, field concerns that can't be resolved by teachers.

The distance learning plan we have developed may differ from some other districts. But, it seems to me that we have an obligation to make educational decisions based upon what we think is in the best interests of our students - taking into account how best to support our teachers and administrators in that effort. I believe that Phase 2 of our distance learning plan is in the best interest of our students.

Going forward, we will continue to reflect on our practice, and as we have done to date, carefully consider the concerns and suggestions offered by parents and students.

New: Phase 2 Website

Please visit our newly launched Phase 2 website, which is on our [District Homepage](#). It includes a number of useful links, connected with our schools. Our Phase 2 site is still in its initial stages, as we are several days

away from developing our Pre-School and BMS sites; however, it contains important information about our programs and a wealth of educational resources.

As we transition to this new phase, I thank our teachers and administrators for their hard work and unequalled dedication to our students - from Stepping Stones to Staples.

Thank you to parents and students, for your understanding and support of our efforts to transition to a new program, during this challenging and complex time.

Have a relaxing, safe and healthy weekend.

Sincerely,

David Abbey
Interim Superintendent

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