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## 4-5-20 COVID-19 Update

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April 5, 2020

Dear Westport Families,

I hope that you and your loved ones are safe and healthy. As we move deeper into the COVID-19 cycle during the next two weeks, I found First Selectman Jim Marpe's words particularly helpful when he recently wrote, "I want to emphasize the concept that you are not **stuck** in your homes; you are **safe** in your homes." Conveying Jim's perspective might be helpful to our students, who understandably have a great desire to get up and go. Of course, it would be wonderful if sooner rather than later we would all be able to do so.

This Update includes information related to the recently concluded Board of Education (BOE) meeting on April 2, as well as future work that the District is engaged in.

### BOE Meeting April 2

#### **New Superintendent**

The BOE unanimously appointed and enthusiastically endorsed Mr. Thomas Scarice as Superintendent of Schools, effective July 1, 2020. Mr. Scarice is completing his eighth year as Superintendent in Madison, Connecticut. He has a well-deserved reputation as an outstanding Superintendent who has the skills and experience to lead our District to even greater heights. During the next few months, along with our administrative team, I will do everything I can to help Tom in his transition to Westport.

#### **Coleytown Middle School Building Project**

Coleytown Middle School Building Committee Chairman Don O'Day updated the BOE regarding construction progress to date. Despite the challenges imposed by COVID-19, the project is on schedule and students are expected to enter a completely renovated CMS on September 1, 2020. BOE members thanked Mr. O'Day and committee members for the tremendous amount of work that they are devoting to the project.

The BOE directed the administration to develop alternative, or back-up plans, in the event that CMS does not open on time. The administration, which under Dr. Buono's leadership has been working this issue for the past couple of months, will be reporting on our alternate plans at the April 13 Board meeting.

#### **BOE Budget**

At its Wednesday, April 1, Board of Finance (BOF) meeting, the BOF voted unanimously to reduce the BOE's budget request for next school year by 1%, or \$1,327,000. Given the fact that the BOE, with BOF backing, will be able to reduce its budget request by \$550,000 due to recent changes in health care program costs, and \$250,000 in facilities costs, as of the moment, we have to account for \$527,000 in reductions. The BOE has directed the administration to come back with a budget reduction proposal at its April 13 meeting - with the proviso that we do everything possible to avoid further reductions in personnel.

#### **Distance Learning and Grading**

We are all experiencing the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on our personal, family, and professional lives. As we continue to work through this unprecedented and continuously evolving challenge, we are looking for ways to provide support, as well as to reduce anxiety among our students. I understand that there are a range of views, many strongly held, with respect to grading practices; however, during the time we are in, I am most concerned about our students' emotional well-being. One way we hope to help is by reducing anxiety, through modifying our grading practices, which we have done in the following manner.

In grades K-5 - Next week standard progress reports from the second trimester, which concluded on March 11, will be sent to parents. The third trimester reporting system has been changed. As such, at the end of third trimester, teachers will be reporting student progress solely through written comments to parents.

At Bedford Middle School – Third quarter ended April 3. Students will receive third quarter report card grades, which will be sent to BMS families on or about April 14. Fourth quarter report card grades will be reported on a Pass-Fail basis. Within the next few days, BMS families will be receiving detailed information from the BMS administration, regarding BMS fourth quarter grading practices.

At Staples High School – Third quarter ended April 3. Third quarter grades will be reported in the traditional manner. Students will have the option of deciding whether they would like to have their fourth quarter grades reported on a Pass-Fail or Letter Grade basis. The high school is still working out the specifics regarding this modified process, including establishing timelines for selecting the Pass-Fail or Grade Letter options. Additional information regarding the modified grading approach at Staples will be sent to Staples families next week.

### Going Forward

#### **Before School Programs**

As part of the discussion regarding school start time changes for next year, the BOE asked the administration to look into the possibility of establishing before school programs as a way of providing support to families. Dr. Buono has taken the lead with respect to this effort and will report on progress to date at the April 13 BOE meeting.

#### **Administrative Vacancies**

John Bayers, Director of Human Resources (HR) and General Administration, is in the process of advertising our two vacancies – Assistant Superintendent for Pupil Personnel Services and Coordinator of Music and Visual Arts – and establishing interview committees for both positions. As Director of HR, Mr. Bayers will be organizing and leading both searches.

#### **Zoom**

Last week we received notification that Zoom had signed an agreement with the State indicating that they would comply with the State's Student Data Privacy Law. However unfortunately, there have been a number of well-publicized and troubling security breaches (hacks) that have negatively impacted groups using Zoom. As a result, until we have greater confidence in Zoom's safety and security practices, we will be limiting our platforms for instruction to Schoology Conference and Google Meeting.

As we look forward to the coming week, I remain grateful for the dedication and hard work being done by my colleagues – certified and noncertified – who have stepped up to help in so many important ways.

And, I remain grateful to our school families and community members, including town officials, who continue to support the work that we do.

I hope that you are having a safe, healthy, and relaxing weekend.

Sincerely,

David Abbey  
Interim Superintendent

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