



# Egg Harbor Township Schools

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To Our Egg Harbor Township School Community,

The health, safety and welfare of our Egg Harbor Township School District Students and Staff is paramount in all of our decision making for the upcoming 2020-2021 school year. As you may be aware for the past month, we have worked very hard to follow the orders from Governor Murphy and the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE). This began with the 104 page Road Back to School (RBS) document where our RBS Committee (Committee) had to review and discuss plans and options for in-person instruction for the 2020-2021 school year while also reviewing four key categories to ensure a safe return to school, the Committee also had to recommend options if the District was forced to suddenly pivot to an all virtual instruction option. Our Committee was divided into 11 subcommittees allowing input from over 800 stakeholders. The Committee conducted a 5 hour virtual meeting, to review every section of the RBS while building one final plan with options for in-person instruction and virtual learning options as required by the NJDOE. The RBS Plan was approved by the Board on July 28, 2020. Since then the District continued to prepare for the opening of school in the safest and healthiest way possible.

Despite our best efforts to be overly prepared, the State continues to provide additional guidance and information for schools to follow resulting in the need to continue to revisit, readjust and revamp our plans. On August 3, 2020 the NJDOE also released a checklist for reopening of schools that outlined 12 areas that had to be reviewed and implemented based upon NJDOE expectations. Being the team players that we are, we did our best to adhere to the check-list items. On August 13, 2020 the Governor released Executive Order 175 (EO 175) and the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) released guidelines for local health departments. After reviewing these documents it is our opinion that there is conflicting guidance, ambiguous information, and differing opinions then we previously received from our Local Department of Health regarding key areas such as social distancing, contact tracing, ventilation, face coverings, and length of time for student and staff member occupancy of a space.

EO175 says that all school districts that reopen for full or part-time for in-person instruction must meet health and safety standards, delineated in the Department of Education's "Checklist for Re-Opening of School 2020-2021" and detailed in "The Road Back: Restart and Recovery Plan for Education" which include, but are not limited to specific expectations in social distancing, ppe and face masks, cleaning and sanitization, facilitation of hand-washing stations or alcohol based hand sanitizers, bus procedures, student and staff screening, protocols for if someone becomes sick, a plan to ensure facilities have adequate ventilation, plans for athletics, physical education, choir and music classes, and contact

tracing. It also says, if a school district is unable to satisfy all of the requirements above, a district may provide full-time remote instruction to all students.

Educational advocates, the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association and the New Jersey Education Association released a joint statement that schools are not ready to open because the guidelines are not achievable under current conditions and this includes inadequate funding, PPEs, contact tracing, unknowns, and unanswered questions. These associations are recommending all remote learning for school districts to safe-guard students and staff from this highly contagious and lethal virus since they are without the needed tools and training. As a District I must stress the lack of clear guidelines and detailed protocols for monitoring, contact tracing, and notification is a concern. The New Jersey State Association of School Nurses endorses an all remote start for the school year to give schools extra time to ensure that health and safety protocols can be met before students and staff return to in person learning and to help manage the spread of COVID -19. In addition, we just received a letter from the President of the Egg Harbor Township Education Association also seeking a remote start to the school year.

In my profession, I find that we have to decide to be leaders or followers - I will be a leader! After many sleepless nights and weighing all that we have done and all that we need to do, I can no longer lead with unclear guidance. A good leader takes a school district off the bumpy road back to school and does what is right to ensure the health and safety of student(s), teachers and staff. There are not many more days of summer - I cannot wait any longer for more guidance. We are too big of a school district - The need for one voice, one message is important to my staff and should be just as important to the NJDOE and Governor. Change takes time in a huge school district and it involves training. We need time to prepare our schools, teachers, staff, students, and parents in the use of PPE, social distancing, and remote learning so that everyone is safe. In addition, we need time to have our PPE completely in stock; we are working on traffic and flow logistics for social distancing in each school and waiting for our government-sponsored technology to arrive. It is time to take control of what I can control and that is recommending remote learning for all.

Let me be clear - I am not saying that our schools are unsafe. Please know that our staff want to come into our schools. I am saying that due to the changing and unclear guidance, lack of ppe, lack of time to make needed changes for scheduling and social distancing, and the need to ensure that we meet or exceed the NJDOE /Governor's/NJDOH expectations, Egg Harbor Township Schools will open with a remote learning model on September 8th and continue until October 23, 2020. We anticipate based on the information that we have now that October 26, 2020 will be the start date of the EHTRBS plan of hybrid and virtual learning options for students. Please follow our website and for updated information.

As an educator I know the importance of schools and the critical role they play in the well being of children and communities. Schools provide critical instruction and academic support, social emotional and mental health support, athletics, fine and performing arts, activities, and special services for student success. We are well aware that some of our students require specialized programming and services. We know this is not ideal, and while we will remain virtual for the start of the school year, we are going to be providing information on utilizing TALONS (in-person) and virtual ASPIRE programs for our families during this time period as well as working on providing parent meetings for our special needs families to review our educational plans and related services moving forward. At this time, I know that we can assure that spaces for these programs will have PPE and training in place for those who monitor them.

I want to assure everyone that this virtual learning plan will be different than what we had in the spring. This plan will have more structure, a student and teacher schedule over an abbreviated day with time in afternoon for small group instruction and meetings with teachers. Teachers will have time built in to be trained on building lessons. Students will have to attend for 4 hours of instruction and attendance will be taken. Athletics and Band will be allowed to continue while we are closed- however we have heard that the NJSIAA is sharing new news this week on the fall season. So change may happen there as well.

It is important for you to understand and EMBRACE the current reality and complexities of this very large school district; for all to ENGAGE in working together where are prepared for in-person instruction in our schools; and appreciate the need for us to EDUCATE ALL on safety protocols and remote Learning. Once all is in place, we can then say we will be #EHTReady!

We are #EHTStrong! While I realize that this decision did not please all, I am confident that my decision was made for the health, safety, and welfare of your child; the number one priority that I live by every day!

Yours in Education,

Handwritten signature of Kimberly A. Gruccio in black ink.

Kimberly A. Gruccio, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of Schools