

MONTCLAIR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

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Superintendent of Schools

Jonathan Ponds, Ed.D.

November 20, 2020

Dear Families, Caregivers and Staff,

We have paused the start of hybrid instruction as we follow the weekly activity level reports and the guidance from the New Jersey Health Department as well as collaborating with our medical team, our school doctor and the Township Health Department. These reports are one week behind and for the week ending November 14, our region (Bergen, Essex and Hudson) was orange or high. An important factor is that the positivity rates are trending upward, and we continue to monitor them going forward.

Please be assured that we are actively seeking a safe way to implement in-person learning for our most at-risk students and youngest learners. However, everyone's health is the top priority. Work continues at all of our schools in preparation for a return to classrooms. Buildings and Grounds staff and Principals are ensuring that the physical spaces are ready with signage, classroom set ups, and logistical procedures, such as arrival and dismissal and movement in hallways. Your principals have been sending detailed, weekly messages regarding specifics.

At Central Office we are making progress on curriculum-based enhancements and initiatives to support teaching and learning. Read more about this work below:

- **Gifted and Talented - [District to launch SAIL pilot program](#)**
The Department of Equity, Curriculum & Instruction is continuing to evaluate and refine our Students Accelerated in Learning (SAIL) gifted and talented programming. A SAIL committee, composed of district and building administrators, teachers, and parents/guardians, will focus on enhancing the gifted and talented universal screening process, as well as continuum of services for identified students in the content areas of English Language Arts and mathematics. The district will be launching a SAIL pilot program in English Language Arts for students in grades 1- 6. Students identified for the pilot will receive differentiated instruction within the mainstream classroom through the implementation of the SAIL toolkit, a district-created resource that contains strategies and activities that support teachers in providing effective enrichment programming. Additional instructional resources designed for gifted and talented

learners will also be implemented as part of the pilot. Equity will remain at the core of this work.

- **Title I Funding**

As the pandemic continues, we seek ways to improve our instructional practices to support all students. We are working with the principals of Title I schools to determine the most effective way to utilize Title I funding. Additionally, we are working with principals to develop an extended day program that would support students during after school hours from 3 to 6 PM.

- **Orton-Gillingham**

Teachers participating in the Fairleigh Dickinson University Orton-Gillingham Program are nearing the end of their first semester. They have been consistently attending training and working with our grade 1 and 2 students on Wednesdays. We will begin the process of selecting older students in grades 3, 4, 5 and 6 for the second semester beginning in January. This multisensory approach to teaching literacy is prescribed when reading, writing, and spelling does not come easily to students, such as those who may have dyslexia or other individual learning needs.

- **Special Education**

We will be conducting an audit of our Special Education programming using an outside consultant. We expect to screen consultants next week. The audit will help us enhance programming to meet our students' needs. We are eager to get started with this most important work. During the audit, the consultant will be seeking valuable input from our families.

A Special Education web page for the district website is under development. We are designing this page as a useful resource with pertinent information that includes information on programming, how to contact us and who can best answer your questions, how the IEP process works, and more.

Food Service

Food service is available for every child regardless of free and reduced meal status. The schedule for picking up meals is as follows: Monday and Wednesday from 11:30 AM to 1:30 PM at Nishuane, Bullock, Northeast and Montclair High School.

Facilities

In our elementary schools mechanical systems have been addressed and air purifiers have been provided in areas where the reliance is on natural ventilation. Throughout the district repairs to mechanical systems are ongoing. We have been and will continue to clean/disinfect/sanitize our buildings according to CDC guidelines as we prepare for the return of students and staff to in-person learning.

Health and Wellness Contract

For those students who will be participating in hybrid learning when it is safe to do so, families will be required to complete a health and wellness contract which is now uploaded to your Parent Access account. You may complete this form at any time prior to reentry. In doing so you acknowledge your commitment to adhering to our health and safety guidelines.

Technology

Due to the Thanksgiving Day holiday, next week's distribution of devices will take place on Tuesday, November 24, at Hillside School (Entrance B) from 9 AM to 12 Noon and from 1 to 2 PM. The following week distribution will take place on Wednesday, December 2, at Hillside School (Entrance B) from 9 AM to 12 Noon and from 1 to 2 PM.

The district has recently entered an agreement with Comcast Essentials for in-home WiFi access. This service is only available to families who do **not** have existing Internet service and is subject to approval by Comcast. This service is not intended to supplement any existing Internet service. Families can reach out to their building principal if they need this service.

Our technology helpline, 301-259-1510, is open Monday through Friday from 8 AM to 3 PM, excluding the Thanksgiving Day holiday (Nov. 26 and 27).

During these difficult times, we are especially grateful for the philanthropic spirit and overwhelming generosity of our community. This fall we have received a number of donations that will be used to support our students and schools.

- The Montclair Fund for Educational Excellence has awarded the district a \$20,000 grant to support vital technology needs during remote/hybrid learning. These funds will help support purchasing additional laptops, districtwide licensing for software/applications, Internet Essentials for families in need and more.
- Our boys and girls soccer teams and girls lacrosse team donated Chromebooks to help us bridge the digital divide.
- The Mandarin program at Nishuane School is also the recipient of a donation from a Nishuane parent.
- The PTA at Northeast has donated monies so that the music teacher has the equipment and technology to create digital performances. Specifically, this equipment will allow the teacher to record individual performances in a virtual setting and combine them into a full concert.

On behalf of the district I extend heartfelt appreciation for the caring individuals, teams, and organizations that do so much to benefit our students.

*As the district is closed next Thursday and Friday for the Thanksgiving Day holiday, my next update will be December 4 regarding our reevaluation of hybrid instruction. At that time, I will also be **renaming the update as my Weekly Community Message No. 1.***

To all of our school support staff – secretaries, paraprofessionals, cafeteria workers, maintenance and custodial staff, bus drivers, and others – thank you for supporting our educators, administrators, and of course our students! This week November 18 was recognized as National Educational Support

Professionals (ESP) Day, but here in Montclair we celebrate you all year. Even during our virtual learning, you are integral to our students' wellbeing.

Throughout this pandemic families and staff members have gone above and beyond for our students. Here is just one example that has come to my attention that I want to share with you: a Hillside art teacher creatively found a way to make connections with students and their families through a special project that is simply joyful. Please take a moment to view the collective work, [Caravaggio Comes to Life](#).

I wish everyone a safe, healthy Thanksgiving filled with the love and comfort of family and friends.

Sincerely,
Dr. Jonathan Ponds
Superintendent