



Colchester Public Schools

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"We create innovative thinkers for a dynamic world"

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Superintendent of Schools

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March 23, 2020

Good Afternoon Parents and Caregivers,

As you know, there have been considerable shifts in response to COVID-19 and the protocols for school districts in Connecticut. I would like to give you status updates on a variety of initiatives that the District has been addressing:

OFFICE CLOSINGS

As of Tuesday, March 24, 2020 school offices and Central Office in Town Hall are closed, but staff are checking voicemail messages and emails.

APRIL BREAK

As this point, April Break is still on, as is Memorial Day. The April break will allow staff to review progress on our interim learning opportunities and plan for further instruction.

MEALS

The "Grab & Go" meal service for all students will continue until further notice at Bacon Academy, Monday through Friday from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m. This is a drive-through service located in front of the auditorium doors. If you responded to the survey that you have no transportation for meals, please email Leanne Ranheim at lrnheim@colchesterct.org.

STATE ASSESSMENTS

All state standardized assessments have been canceled for the 2019-2020 school year.

CONTINUITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

We are excited to announce that **Phase II: Interim Learning Opportunities will begin on Thursday, March 26**, and will include online instruction provided by our expert faculty using Google Classroom.

In preparation for Phase II, our entire certified faculty is spending March 23 and 24 training for online instruction and March 25 organizing and planning for instruction. **A website titled *CPS Interim Learning Opportunities* will be published on Tuesday, March 24 at 5PM, and a link will be emailed to all families.** The website will provide families with information about how to access Google Classroom, helpful tips for

supporting students in an online learning environment, expectations for online learning, and information on who to contact for help.

If your household does not have access to wireless internet at home, please click [here](#) and contact one of the vendors who are offering free or low-cost access. If your student does not have access to a working device or needs technical assistance, please send an email to techhelp@colchesterct.org to schedule an appointment.

The District will be sending a survey out each Friday to families to collect feedback about the online learning experience. Your response is appreciated so that we may continually improve our delivery of instruction. Results of the survey will be anonymous, so if you have specific needs, please direct them to the appropriate person as listed on the website.

I am grateful to all of our instructional staff and administrators for their hard work over the past week to create a plan to transition teaching and learning to a digital environment in just five days. This is an incredible and innovative shift for staff, students, and families and will continue to be strengthened over the course of this closure.

RESPONSE TO INTERIM LEARNING TIMELINE QUESTIONS

I have been listening to your concerns about why Colchester Public Schools has not been able to implement extended learning opportunities more quickly, such as other districts have. To be clear, we are just as concerned as all of you with this extended break from learning. However, there were a number of factors that placed constraints on providing a comprehensive program sooner. I'd like to share with you our process to this point so that you'll understand how incredibly proud I am of our Colchester Public Schools staff and teachers, who have approached this challenge over the last two weeks with the utmost level of dedication to providing continued educational opportunities for *all* of our students.

First and foremost, there were unclear messages from various state agencies and an unclear timeline for the closure of schools. It was just about ten days ago that guidelines from the State stated that school districts only needed to provide supplemental learning packets in anticipation of a short-term closure. At the same time, districts could apply for "waivers" to be approved by the State to provide distance learning for that short-term closure to avoid extending their school year. The waiver required that instruction and access to instruction be equitable for *all* students. Many districts that had already provided devices to every K-12 student in previous years were able to meet that standard quickly; however, this was not a condition we were confident that we could meet. In addition, it appeared that we would be required to use all available time, such as April break and extending the school year to June 30, to make up for lost learning. Since that time, the Governor has closed all schools until at least April 22 and has indicated that districts and families should plan for a longer closure. The Governor also waived the 180 student day requirement for all schools, allowing us to close on our previously published last day of June 15. Last week, the Commissioner of Education asked all districts to provide extended learning opportunities as best as they could. When these changes were made public last Monday, our staff, under the guidance of Dr. Charles Hewes, were able to move forward with extensive planning for interim learning opportunities online for grades PreK-12.

A second reason that we did not roll-out interim learning opportunities more quickly was because our leadership team needed the time to create a substantive plan and extensive training for teachers to provide, to the greatest extent possible, access to learning for *all students*. Just this past Friday, our Information Technology staff handed out over 90 chromebooks as a result of a survey taken last week to identify those families who had no device at home for their student to learn online. Also, we are still awaiting critical information from the CT State Department of Education on how to provide support and accommodations in an online setting to our students who have special needs.

Additionally, our District is in the first year of a 10-year technology plan. Constraints in previous budgets made technology purchases difficult. Only in the past two years has the district been able to purchase devices for our staff. This year's budget was the first ever to include large purchases of devices for students, including over 500 Chromebooks and 100 iPads, and those purchases have only moved our district half-way towards the number of student devices outlined in our technology plan. Many other districts have had these devices for a number of years, and were able to roll out online learning more quickly. We are thankful that we had the amount of devices we have now. Without them, we would not have had the resources to provide interim learning opportunities online to all grade levels.

Lastly, we have taken great care to ensure that our instructional staff have the appropriate knowledge, technology, and support to transition to distance learning, which was not a priority before the COVID-19 outbreak. In two days, we will train 250 educators in 13+ modules to support them in transforming their teaching and planning from in-person to online.

I thank you for your patience as we continue to respond thoughtfully to a rapidly changing situation while simultaneously establishing a long-term plan to address the needs of Colchester's families.

Please Be Safe,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeff Burt", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jeffrey Burt
Superintendent