

OCEAN CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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March 2, 2021

Dear School Community:

The Ocean City School District Board of Education and administration are aware of growing calls for our School District to return students in grades 6 through 12 to five days of in-person learning. We want this too, but **there is one major hurdle we must clear to be able to make this transition: the 6-foot social distancing recommendation.** We are asking you to work with us so we can collectively focus our energy and influence on updated guidance from the state that would responsibly bring every OCSD student back into our classrooms for five full days.

First, we do plan to bring 6th grade back for five days of in-person learning starting mid-March. We are now working through the logistics of that transition. We need to move some classes into different classrooms so that our largest class sizes learn in our largest classroom spaces. This will enable us to welcome back the 6th grade and still maintain 6 feet of distance between each student in each classroom. The adjustments we are making to accommodate the 6th grade maximize our use of space in the Intermediate School. We do not have any moves left that will make it possible to combine the 7th and 8th grade hybrid cohorts and still follow the current CDC and NJDOH social distancing recommendation.

Here's why this 6-foot social distancing recommendation is preventing us from combining hybrid cohorts in grades 7 and 8, as well as in our high school for grades 9-12:

- We have committed to following the recommendations of our state health officials since the start of this pandemic, as they are the experts in public health. Their current guidance continues to adhere to the CDC 6-foot social distancing recommendation.
- On average, our class sizes for students in grades 7-12 are too large to allow us to space students 6 feet apart at all times in our classrooms. This was not the case for students in grades K-5, which is why our district's youngest learners returned for five full days on Feb. 1. Our additional efforts to maximize space in the Intermediate School has led to the recent news about 6th grade transitioning back to five days this month.
- The current CDC and NJDOH guidelines for contact tracing consider a close contact as someone who is within the 6-foot range for more than 15 minutes. Unless this contact tracing guidance is also updated, we run the risk of having entire classrooms deemed "close contacts" if one person in a class tests positive and the class sits any closer than 6 feet apart. This would require an entire classroom – not just a student or two – to go fully virtual for an extended period of quarantine.
- **Our schools opened on time for in-person learning through our hybrid model in September, and the district has added in-person time consistently throughout the year** while following the recommended health and safety measures. That has **resulted in our schools staying open.** We fear that ignoring the current social distancing recommendations may lead to a greater number of identified close contacts and more frequent classroom or full school closures for quarantines. **That would be a step backward, not forward.**

Ocean City School District will send a letter to Governor Murphy asking for an update on social distancing and contact tracing recommendations for New Jersey's schools. We want to know if it is safe to reduce the 6-foot social distancing recommendation in some instances to help schools bring students back into our classrooms.



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If you want to take productive steps to get all OCSD students back into school five days a week, contact the Governor, the New Jersey Department of Health and the New Jersey Department of Education and our state legislators. Let them know that we need updated recommendations for social distancing in our classrooms. Indiana and Massachusetts are among the states on a growing list that now ask schools to aim for 6 feet of distance, but allow a minimum of 3 feet in some instances.

As recently as January, the New Jersey Department of Health updated its guidance for local health departments that advise schools to include new measures for safely resuming sports and other extracurricular activities. **School districts now need an update that enables us to get kids back in classrooms safely – our first priority.**

On February 10, our School District sent a letter to Governor Murphy, signed by the Board President, Joseph Clark, and me asking for the state to prioritize educators to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Yesterday, Governor Murphy announced that educators would move into a priority group starting March 15.

This type of advocacy works and is most effective if we have a strong, unified message. Getting our teachers vaccinated will help them have peace of mind and protection when in our classrooms. Next, let us focus, together, on finding a solution to getting our students back into the classroom when we cannot always adhere to a full 6 feet of distance between desks.

Ocean City's efforts will be more successful if we work together, as a community. We appreciate your support, whether that's through calls to the Governor's office, messages sent through social media or to your own contacts in government or the media.

We welcome the opportunity to continue to have productive conversations about next steps toward successfully opening schools for every Ocean City School District student.

Thank you,



Kathleen W. Taylor, Ed.D.
Superintendent



Joseph S. Clark
Board of Education, President