

The Board of Education wishes to address questions and misunderstandings relative to Fairfield's reopening plans. Before responding to any reoccurring questions, I would like to acknowledge that the district's administration and staff has been working tirelessly for our students during these challenging times. Keeping our schools open is a priority of the Board. We are not willing to put teachers, staff, students, and families in unsafe conditions.

First, here is an explanation the role of the Board of Education. The school board has a dual role: To represent the concerns of the citizens, taxpayers and parents to the school administrators, and to represent the needs of the students and school district to the citizens, taxpayers and parents of the community. The school board does not operate the district on a day-to-day basis; that is the job of the superintendent, who is the district's chief executive. Rather, the school board sets the policies, goals and objectives for the district – and it holds the superintendent responsible for implementing the policies and achieving the goals. With that said, we came up with a list of questions and answers we felt the community was asking the most.

Q-Why can't we do less than 6 feet?

A-The local health official will NOT approve a plan for in-person instruction within this distance.

Q-Does the local health official need to approve this plan?

A- Yes. The County Superintendent has to approve it as well. The State DOE will keep it on file after the county superintendent approves it. The local health official has indicated that NO school in Essex County is approved to be within six feet. If they are found to be within six feet, they will get reported to the state for corrective measures or possible shut down.

Q-Can we go against the local health official?

A- This is not advised as described for liability. Also, we cannot go against the social distancing because he won't approve it. If we go against his recommendation, we will be reported to the state and have issues at the state level which undoubtedly impact our programs.

Q-Does the local health official have the authority to shut us down?

A- Yes as explained above. There's a pandemic response team, which the administration and nurses are on with the local health department to work together on decisions.

Q-What happens the next time a suspected case comes up?

A-Procedures are in place for schools to follow while working closely with nurses, physicians, health officials and affected families. These procedures map out numerous scenarios such as 1 child, 2 children that are siblings, more than 1 in one class or more than 1 in different classes. We must work with the local health office to make a decision on what needs to happen. This is governed by the New Jersey Department of Health recommendations and may be found on nj.gov or covid19.nj.gov.

Q-How many cases are too many cases?

A-There is no set number. Following the procedures put in place, that decision would only be made if necessary to control a spread. Even if there's only 2 cases, we can be advised to shut down.

Please note: The New Jersey Department of Health places regions of the state into risk zones as it relates to COVID-19. On 10/03/2020, we (Essex County) were elevated from Low Risk (Green) to Moderate Risk (Yellow), and we continue to remain at this level. This has an impact on the schools.

When a location is classified as having a "moderate" COVID-19 activity level, if a student comes to school and exhibits one of the following COVID-19 symptoms from the daily health screener, the student must go to the doctor to either get an alternative diagnosis or have a negative COVID test. These symptoms include: new cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, new loss of smell, new loss of taste, fever (100.4 or higher), chills, muscle aches, headache, sore throat, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fatigue, congestion, or a runny nose.

If a student does not go to the doctor, he/she must stay home for at least ten calendar days from the symptom onset and then have at least 24 hours pass without a fever (100.4 or higher) and improved symptoms. Furthermore, if a student comes to school and exhibits the COVID-19 symptoms as outlined above, additional cleaning and sanitizing procedures may need to be performed.

Additionally, just this week, the Centers for Disease Control recently updated the criteria of a close contact. A close contact now includes a total of 15 minutes or more of close contact (within 6 feet) exposure to an infected person during a 24-hour period. Please note that the period of exposure is cumulative (i.e., the total amount when it is added together).

This exposure must occur when the infected person is considered to be infectious which begins 2 days prior to symptom onset, or specimen collection for asymptomatic cases, and extends for most people for 10 days after onset of symptoms and 1 day after fever has resolved. In summary, the new definition requires 15 minutes or more of close contact (within 6 feet) of exposure to an infected person during a 24-hour period in which the infected person is infectious.

Q-What happened the last time we received notification very late on a Sunday of a closure?

A-Mid week, West Essex learned of positive cases in the regional school system. They immediately called a one-week closure. Sending districts were put on notice, and the local health official began the contact tracing process. At the end of that week, a large Fairfield party was suspected of causing a spread of the virus. The local health official was attempting to determine the seriousness of all suspected outbreaks with contact tracing, stating that he was being met with resistance and uncooperative individuals. As of Friday, the health official was unsure if we needed to close our schools. We did not want to prematurely close if unnecessary. All weekend, the Superintendent remained in contact with the health official trying to obtain his professional opinion on whether or not our schools would be considered at risk of spreading the virus. No determination was made as of Saturday evening. The Superintendent was told to reach out Sunday afternoon by the health official, as he was hoping to have a grasp on it and could recommend staying open. Then, Sunday evening it was strongly recommended that we close down for two weeks. It should be noted that several new cases were discovered on that Sunday. Unhappy with this decision, our Superintendent consulted with the school nurse, school physician, county superintendent and the school board attorney. All of them advised that we better follow this recommendation. After exhausting all options to stay open, we had to close, and therefore, made that late notification. Thankfully, the health official cleared us during the first week so we may open the doors on week 2. This occurred because people started cooperating with the contact tracing. Going forward, we hope that this process is better handled by the health office and the community, so if we do need to close, a determination can be made sooner.

Q-How is North Caldwell and Roseland doing it?

A-The following offers an explanation of the differences between Fairfield and the consortium districts (Roseland & North Caldwell).

1. The ongoing question about safe space social distancing measures (3 feet vs. 6 feet)?
 - a. All districts in our consortium are following the CDC/DOE recommendation of 6 feet, with desk shields and masks.
 - b. Again, our local health officer WILL NOT approve our plans if they are not reflective of 6 feet for social distancing within the classrooms.
2. Why do the schedules look different between the consortium districts?

The following factors created roadblocks we faced when building schedules:

 - a. **Student population differences:**
Fairfield: 696 students.....largest district
Roseland: 456 students
NC: 687 Students
 - b. **Full-time remote students:**
Fairfield: 85
Roseland: 97
NC: 83

c. (For your reference: In-school numbers are):

Fairfield: 611

Roseland: 359

NC: 604

d. Classroom square footage differences:

Fairfield ranges from 552 sq. feet- 899 sq. feet (The K rooms are the rooms that are 899 sq. feet, with tables, which takes up more room than desks).

Roseland: 850 sq. feet

NC: ranges like us

e. Due to these constraints, we put in place an additional adult in most classrooms (ST has 2 in every room, CH most) to assist with the virtual students so the homeroom teacher could focus on the in-person students.

~We kept our K aides to assist in class. Roseland and NC do not have K aides unless required by IEP. They do not have K aides during traditional school years either.

Remember, our virtual is “live” in class. Two teachers are needed, one for in-person kids and one monitoring virtual. North Caldwell, Roseland, and I believe, West Caldwell/Caldwell, DO NOT have “live” virtual. They use recorded lessons or videos or some other form of “busy” work for the kids to satisfy the hours needed to constitute the day counting toward the 180-day requirement. Also, note that if we go AM/PM, then students will also need to be virtual the other half of the day that they are out of school. That’s how these other districts are doing it.

f. Busing differences:

Fairfield: 100% courtesy busing still intact. Maxed out at 21 students.

~Poses issues with cost (funds are not available to add any more. We already added 2 buses for the K split sessions which WAS NOT budgeted for).

~Eats up our costs where the other districts saved money with bus cuts.

~Scheduling issues: Cannot pickup/drop off students on split sessions.

~Tiering with WE restricts us from running a PM session while provide busing

~Aides on each bus (COSTLY) to take temperatures prior to getting to school.

Roseland: Courtesy busing cut

~Buses for K-2 come every day (AM ONLY).

~Buses are limited to 11 students (plus siblings).

~Buses for 3-6 come only on A days. (they added 6 buses to do this).

~Aides on buses but they do not take temperatures. Temperatures taken at school.

NC: No courtesy busing. Cut subscription busing, too.

~ No aides on buses. Temperatures taken at school.

g. Funds:

~Busing savings in Roseland allowed them to offer split sessions. They used the saved funds to add buses to AM sessions. No tiering issues with WE because no buses are offered in the PM.

~Busing savings in NC gave them more flexibility to add staffing. NC also had funding from their Educational Foundation. With more space and money, additional teachers were hired to split large sections to offer 5 days a week.

Fairfield simply does not have additional room to spread out (hence the reason for a referendum) nor the funds to hire additional teachers.

Q-So what exactly are the bussing issues?

A-If we want an AM/PM schedule (similar to kindergarten) for another grade (1st grade for example), we will not be able to offer pick up and drop off for both sessions. The bus company wants thousands of dollars to add routes which is money we don’t have. Furthermore, busses may not even be available at the times we need them.

Q-If we alter or cut some bussing, will we be able to do AM/PM?

A-Most likely, yes. If we go to an AM/PM schedule for any more grade levels, then bus services will have to be cut and/or altered in some way. This could include a restructure of who is allowed to use the service (i.e.: no one inside two miles, or having AM session only routes (meaning parents would be responsible for pick up and/or drop off on PM), or maybe AM drop off and PM pickup only.) There is a domino effect which means when we add something we ultimately must cut something. The board has asked our administration to work on multiple scenarios so we can see how this would work. This will take some time as a lot of planning and preparation goes into mapping this out, but your board wants to see how we can be creative and work around our restrictions to get more in-person instruction.

Q-If we take away Tiny Treasures, will we have the room to get first grade in 5 days?

A- No. We still do not have enough space in the school to fit all students in while maintaining the restrictions set in place. Furthermore, we do not have funds to add teachers at this time.

Q-Why can't first grade go every day on the full schedule instead of two days? (8:35 AM-1:05 PM)

A- We simply do not have the space to fit everyone under the safety requirements. Other districts may, but we don't. And even if we did, as I said earlier, we do not have the funds to add additional teachers at this time.

Q-Can cohorts be mixed?

A-No. That is against contact tracing protocols and for minimizing the spread (remember the yellow zone we are in). But even if we did, we still do not have enough space.

Q-Can the district use another location to provide instruction?

A-Yes, but unfortunately, we absolutely do not have the funds available for this option. (Lots of cost associated)

Q-What needs to happen to move to next phase, then next and next?

A- Ultimately, we will need busing cuts and/or restrictions loosened. However, the district is looking to start the alternating Wednesdays on 11/04/2020. Please note that there will be NO AIDES on the buses on Wednesdays due to the hours they are allowed to work. Then, if restrictions loosen, additional options listed in our plan will occur (we cannot put a date on that). Moving to split sessions (AM/PM) will require a lot of planning and busing HAS TO BE CUT to offer something similar as Roseland. Again, the bus company cannot run all the routes, and we DO NOT have funds for additional routes.

Dr. Ciccotelli and the rest of the administration have worked very hard to ensure that the guidelines set by the State, County and Local authorities have been met while ensuring that each student has the best possible educational experience that can be made available to them during these difficult times. The District's plan has been approved by the local health department and County Executive Superintendent as meeting all the guidelines set forth in the Road Back.

While some community members are quick to condemn the Superintendent, school administrators and/or board members, we have only kept the best interest of the entire district in mind. Hopefully, you can now see the many issues we face and how comparing the districts isn't as easy as it seems. Each school community is unique, and therefore, comparing them proves there is more than meets the eye. As stated by the Governor numerous times, there is no "good" answer or "one size fits all" to the current situation. That is why he has left it up to the locals to figure out. As in most difficult situations, there is no decision regarding the district's plans that will please everyone. There are positives and negatives to any decision that is made.

In closing, it is our hope you have a clearer understanding of the many roadblocks the district is faced while creating schedules and will continue to face in making changes moving forward. We are all in this together and appreciate your passion and support in providing the best we can to our students during these unusual times.

Please remember, as board members we are no different than you. We are residents and parents of this community. We volunteered for these positions and devote a lot of our personal time to make sure our school system remain at high level. We do want schools open with as much in-person instruction as possible and will accept nothing less. This message has been relayed to the school administration and I whole heartedly believe they are doing the best they can. They have earned this boards trust and I hope we have earned yours.