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Helen Payne, Superintendent

## Questions and Answers About Shifting from In-Person to Remote Instruction

As we continue to navigate the effects of a once in a century global pandemic created by the exponential spread of COVID-19, our district is proud to be among a very small number of districts in NJ that has been able to offer 5 days of in-person education from September until mid-December, and an even smaller number offering full days of instruction. This week alone, (January 4, 2021), we are one of only 6 districts in the county offering ANY in-school instruction, and we are still offering 5 days. These actions demonstrate our full commitment to offering the educational programs our community and our children need, but in a way that upholds the safety precautions we promised our community.

School administrators across the country have been forced to make educational programming decisions based on a medical emergency that has impacted almost every aspect of our daily lives. We want to reassure you that our district's decisions are strategic and deliberate, and the needs of our children and families are well considered. A decision to shift to remote instruction for all students will always be made with gravity, and based on the total picture of data and information we have available, along with input from our county Department of Health professionals.

This is a very difficult period of time for everyone, but I am grateful to work with such a dedicated team of professional educators, faculty and staff who are doing their very best every day to provide for the educational needs of our students. I am certain that we will get through this together as a community.

Below are some questions and answers related to the decision-making process for a shift to remote instruction.

### 1. Why did the district shift to remote instruction on December 11, 2020?

This decision was made with a heavy heart, as we understand the many educational, financial and logistical problems virtual instruction poses for our communities. However, the dominant factor for the shift was *significant and sustained* staffing difficulty district wide, mostly due to staff quarantining for exposure outside of school. Staff includes teachers, bus drivers, aides, nurses, therapists, special area teachers, principals, custodians, secretaries, clerks, etc. We need all of them to run our buildings safely and legally.

Additionally, one of our schools had several students diagnosed within the week, and a couple of cases were in the same classrooms. After consultation with the Department of Health about these cases, and considering the staffing shortage we were experiencing throughout the district, we felt the responsible action at that time was to make the shift.

**2. Would the district consider shifting just one school to remote if the other schools were functioning normally?**

Absolutely. The smallest number of students affected is our goal. The district has been selectively doing this with individual groups, classes, or buses all along.

**3. Would the district consider keeping just Pre-K and K or first grade students in school?**

Many other districts are opting to do this because they are “hybrid,” offering alternating days (usually just 2 half days a week) of in person instruction. Younger students are accommodated in school more frequently than older students because the district doesn’t have space to accommodate all students. We have been able to work out the space issues that led districts to that model and have not had to implement a hybrid model in North Hanover. Our students receive 5 days of in person instruction.

If another closure became necessary, and these grade levels were adequately staffed and unaffected by illness and quarantines, and there was enough staff to care for the children, the district would consider offering in person to our youngest learners. Note: Pre-K teachers (and several other categories of teachers) require a different certification than a regular K-6 teacher, so their long term absences are more difficult to cover.

**4. Will the district give longer notice before shifting to remote instruction if it becomes necessary again?**

As a district, we do everything we can to maintain an in school instructional program. The only way we would be able to provide longer notice would be to anticipate that we might have an upcoming staffing shortage, and to close preemptively.

Because it isn’t possible to predict when or where a staff member might have close contact or test positive, this would be more of a “guess” and may result in the district closing when it did not ultimately have to close. We do not believe this would serve our students or families any better than the current strategy. We prefer to wait until we actually have an issue, and that can happen very suddenly, sometimes overnight, as people receive information about exposures and illnesses and notify us.

We know that short notice changes are difficult and frustrating for parents. My best advice is to have an emergency “pivot plan’ at the ready. I assure you that we will not ask you to use it unless we feel that it is absolutely necessary.

**5. Why can't substitutes cover for absent staff members?**

There is a nationwide shortage of substitutes. During this pandemic, this is amplified. Our district took the pro-active step in September of hiring "permanent" substitutes in order to be prepared to cover some absences. In a typical year, we have some flexibility to combine classes or cover with rotating teachers as a last resort. During this pandemic, that option is not available as it would break the health guidelines that we have established for the safe operation of our buildings.

So, when the quantity of absences exceeds our ability to cover classes, we have no choice but to offer a remote program.

If anyone reading this is interested in being a substitute teacher, aide, bus driver, nurse or custodian, please contact [fmulryne@nhanover.com](mailto:fmulryne@nhanover.com).

**6. My child's teacher hasn't been out. Why did my child have to shift to remote?**

It is important to know that classroom teachers are only one piece of the staffing puzzle that ensures our schools operate safely and legally. Some staff members that are less obvious, but equally important and sometimes more difficult to cover are bus drivers, aides, nurses, custodians, special services providers, secretaries and principals, to name just a few. We can manage a few absences amongst these important staff members, but not large numbers.

As an example, the absence of just a couple of custodians or school nurses during a health pandemic would make it impossible to clean classrooms and schools or care for sick students adequately enough for safe school operations.

**7. Why is a whole class sometimes quarantined and sometimes only selected students are if there is a positive case in the class?**

Decisions about who gets quarantined are based on a process called contact tracing. Contact tracing is conducted in a manner that respects HIPAA laws. Sometimes we can clearly identify who is a "close contact (closer than 6 feet for more than 15 minutes) and sometimes it is not as clear. We gather the information, and then our administrative and nursing staff consult with the department of health for their expertise regarding recommended quarantines.

If we believe we can responsibly allow part of a class to stay in school, we will do so.