March 29, 2020

Good afternoon Region 15 families and staff,

I hope that today's email finds you in good health and good spirits as we work our way through this situation. While today's email is a bit long, I hope to address some of the questions and concerns that I have heard over the past week. I would like to thank all of you that have reached out to us. I very much understand the challenges you are facing and appreciate your words of support for our teachers and our district. We will continue to make improvements in the days and weeks ahead, but also understand that there will be new questions and problems we will face. Please know that you have a very dedicated team of educators and staff that are working each day to make the best of what has been asked of us.

Lunch Program: The district will continue to provide grab-n-go lunches on Monday and Wednesday of this week from 11:00-1:00 at PHS. In an effort to plan more appropriately, we are asking families planning to pick up lunches to respond to the form here (no names are collected on the form): https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdj5fw86vken2CEZHNNGUIGzuij17yKH6OvfczjC1iujPlrqA/viewform?usp=sf_link

Distance Learning: Congratulations on the completion of the first few days in the new learning environment. The goal last week was for teachers, students, and parents to begin acclimating to the tools and structures we will use moving forward.

I would like to thank all of you for your work and for the feedback you have provided. There are as many situations as students, and everyone is facing different challenges as we work through this pandemic. As a district, we understand that for many of you there is a need for flexibility in assignments and learning structure, while others desire more specific structures. We will continue designing our distance learning model with flexibility for families, however on our website’s resources page, we have provided sample schedules if that is more desirable for your circumstances.

If you have a student in grades 3-12 and haven’t already received a parent login to your student’s Google classroom, you can request access through your student’s teachers. Parent access will allow you to see the assignments but will not provide access to other student’s work or comments. It will also organize all your student’s classes onto one screen and make it easier to stay informed.

Student Data Privacy laws relaxed: This executive action will allow the district to use tools and resources that may not have the state mandated, Data Privacy Agreement, however his is not true for all tools. While we understand the desire to have students meet in virtual spaces, there are still some significant issues and concerns around
videoconferencing. We are working to put safety measures and guidelines in place that will enable students and teachers to begin meeting in real time. Below are the concerns and issues we are working through along with the direction and plans the district is making:

Concerns/Issues:

• Teacher/Student Privacy:
  o Parents will have the ability to watch all sessions. Student responses are not private, nor can the district prevent parents from recording or sharing sessions.
  o Individual rights of student privacy and comfort knowing any question or discussion says within the classroom environment.
  o Teachers will be observed by parents in real time. Never before have parents been able to record lessons and critique/compare the content or delivery of the teacher or students.

• Equity:
  o It is difficult to create “mandatory” classroom structures when students may not have the ability to connect based on their individual circumstances.
  o Depending on a student’s learning plan, they may not be able to participate in a video conference.

• Security:
  o Several video conferencing tools are subject to hacking or “bombing” meaning that those outside of the organization can access the conference.

District responses:

• Waiver: Currently we are working on a parent waiver that explains some of the risks and allows parents to decide if their student will participate.
• Best Practices: A guide for students, teachers, and parents about the do's and don'ts of videoconferencing. Including a reminder that teachers are mandated reporters and that does not change in a virtual environment.
• Clear expectations for teachers and families
• Research and guidelines to the security settings in the tools that we use so that we can best protect the environment from outsiders “invading” the space.
• Clarification of purpose:
  o Videoconferencing should not be used in a manner that requires a student to be “present” in order to receive instruction.
  o Opportunities for social interaction should occur multiple times and allow for family flexibility.
District Help Desks:

If you need support accessing google classroom, instructional materials, websites, contacting staff or other issues that are related to student learning, please email us at: distancelearning@region15.org

If you are having issues with technology, hardware, internet connections, damage, logging into your google account, or other issues with school district hardware, email us at technology@region15.org

Grading: Grading in a distance learning environment continues to be an area of discussion. This past week there were many meetings on the topic both within our district and around the region. While discussed at the state level, is unclear yet if the Commissioner will issue directives or guidelines. School districts are not in agreement and there is little consensus as to what is best. There is a desire for some consistency at the high school level, as student transcripts are a part of the college admission process. Currently the building principal for your student is managing the closeout of the third quarter.

Stay Home Stay Safe: I would like to thank the large number of health professionals in our community that are on the front lines of keeping our communities safe. I would also like to thank those in the food industry and other workers who are providing essential services at this time. I have heard from many this week about the large number of people on our fields and grounds. While we encourage exercise, I would ask that you please keep in mind the increasing risk of gatherings and close contact. Our local hospitals are faced with shortages of resources and staff. We can do our part and not add to their challenges.

Doing our part: Region 15 is doing what we can to support those helping others. We are donating protective equipment to local first responders and hospitals. We are working to use our 3D printers to manufacture parts for ventilators and maintaining our food service for any family who needs it.

Thank you for all that you are doing and for your partnership in this process.

Please be safe,

Joshua Smith
Superintendent
Region 15 Public Schools