

November 24, 2020

Dear Superintendent Salmon:

As you know, we are in a time of deep stress and uncertainty as we face the daily challenges of life during a pandemic. We are seeing coronavirus outbreaks in schools across Maryland, and we are watching with despair the drastic rise in positive cases, community spread, hospitalizations, and deaths due to coronavirus—even as a vaccine appears on the horizon. In the meantime, hospital beds and ICUs are filling up with the very sick. We fear the public health consequences of drops in temperature, rises in travel during the holidays, and how the stubborn refusal to wear masks and socially distance by some prolongs and widens the pain for far too many.

CHERYL BOST
President

DOUG PROUTY
Vice President

JOSEPH COUGHLIN
Treasurer

SEAN JOHNSON
Executive Director

Amid these challenges, educators have stepped up, giving 100% whether in virtual settings, small in-person groups, or full hybrid models that some systems employed during the fall. We've appreciated support and encouragement from parents, who now more than ever must be our partners in lifting up our students, helping them focus on learning, and bolstering their social-emotional wellbeing. We've done our best in circumstances we would not wish upon anyone.

The last couple of months have been a roller coaster; from the educators who returned to classrooms and were able to see their students for the first time in person to the educators who stayed awake at night with terrible concern about their safety or that of their loved ones if they were exposed to the virus in a school setting. From the joy that working with students gives us, no matter the format, to the frustration of seeing inequities exacerbated by the pandemic harm our students, educators have experienced it all. It's been tumultuous for everyone involved as some systems have gone from virtual, transitioned to hybrid, and then quickly back again; or where major changes were scheduled but then modified before taking place. Put simply, it's been exhausting.

As you are aware, it is a huge effort to create lessons and transfer them to virtual then adapt them for in-person, or to bring materials home to teach virtually then move into a classroom situation and back again. No doubt that the stress is felt by all—students, families, educators, administrators, and the entire community. Add the lack of adequate federal funding and a failed national public health response, and the result is deeper stress and greater uncertainty.

In this moment, you can provide certainty and calm.

While we believe that recent local decisions to rollback in person learning have been conducted wisely and with the best interest of the health and safety of students and educators in mind, we also know that setting return dates for partial in-person learning in two-week increments is not the appropriate response at this



time. It is overly stressful on everyone and doesn't allow for any type of continuity of learning or the ability for educators and families to plan ahead. We should give Marylanders a better ability to plan.

An additional stressor on educators is the overwhelming workload that is impacting school employees across the state and across job types. Virtual learning, and real or potential switches back and forth from virtual to hybrid modes of learning, is spiking workloads to precipitous levels for too many educators. We urge you to work with educators and local school system leaders to prevent these elevated workload levels from turning into a prolonged burnout crisis that sets us even further back in our already struggling efforts to recruit and retain outstanding educators in our profession.

As of this writing, we are far exceeding the cautionary metrics set in the state's November 13 COVID-19 Guidance for Maryland Schools. As you know, that document calls for limited or no in-person programs if the testing positivity rate exceeds 5% (it is currently 6.6%) and if the new case rate exceeds 15 per 100,000 (it is currently 38.14 per 100,000). We should follow this guidance and follow the path of colleges and universities that are already showing courtesy to students, faculty, and families by letting them know well in advance that schools will be virtual through at least mid-January. This clear and direct communication allows for better planning and focusing resources and energy on getting virtual learning right—whether through a focus on connectivity, devices, pedagogy, food distribution, or the many other dimensions that impact our students' abilities to learn.

Let's work to destress an already stressful situation and, at the state level, declare that schools will remain virtual through, at a minimum, the end of the semester. Let's get through the holiday season with clarity and consistency. Then based on health metrics, whether schools are meeting health and safety protocols, and the feasibility to begin transitioning to reopening systems to in-person, let's reevaluate plans so we can get to the goal we all share: in-person learning, when it is safe and sustainable to do so.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cheryl Bost". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cheryl Bost
MSEA President

CC:
Local superintendents
Maryland State Board of Education