

Maryland's Largest School District

MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Expanding Opportunity and Unleashing Potential

ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

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By Superintendent Jack R. Smith

It's Sunday, March 22, and we are a little more than a week into this new world we are in. With all but a few states having [closed all schools](#), we are experiencing a cataclysmic shift in how schools, communities and our society function. And the fact is, we do not know what's going to happen or how it's going to happen. We do not know how this will unfold. What we do know is that we are all in this together and we are better together.

It's been an extremely rough week for every member of the school community—parents, families and staff—many of whom are also parents. It's been especially difficult for students. Here's how Steve Snyder, editor of *The 74*, an education-focused website, describes what's happening:

“Students are dislocated. Educators are scrambling to conceive the classroom as a virtual daily gathering. Parents have been deputized overnight as homeschoolers. Advocates are surveying this foreign landscape and raising urgent concerns surrounding issues of equity, inclusion, curriculum, safety, standards and ... well ... everything else that shapes the functioning of a school community.”

{[Read his article](#)}

While it has not yet been announced by the state, it is becoming more apparent to us all that students and staff will not be returning to school buildings on March 30. Given that, what will the remainder of the school year look like? This is yet another question that will need an answer.

So, let's focus on what we do know now. On March 30, we will launch the first phase of a distance learning system so that students can begin to have structured school experiences. A system that will provide multiple ways to access learning for a variety of students. Such a system must include learning that allows for that much needed human connection between staff and students, albeit through different means than what we're used to. A system that will bring some degree of normalcy to the lives of our 166,000 prekindergarten-Grade 12 students.

Even before Dr. Karen Salmon, the state superintendent of schools, declared a two-week emergency closure just over a week ago, we were busy working to chart the course for the largest school system in Maryland. We created meal distribution systems; we have more than 55,000

students who receive multiple free meals on regular school days. Cleaning and sanitizing regimens were put in place for our 208 schools and about 30 other MCPS sites, as well as more than 1,500 buses. We have worked closely with our local and state governments on how we can be helpful around questions of childcare for medical and emergency personnel and the provision of the ongoing healthcare needs of students.

Simultaneously, a few weeks ago we started pulling together our many learning tools and assets—we have a lot of them; they were in no way, however, organized to launch as a structured learning system the day the announcement was made to close schools for two weeks. Because we had begun to organize our resources during the weeks before the emergency closure, we were able to provide students with paper resources and through the web site. As it has become increasingly apparent that two weeks out of school buildings was just a first step, we have spent our time working on a more structured system and are continuing each day to build it out. Our employee associations have joined in the work as collaborative partners.

Our 24,000 employees are experiencing this situation just like everyone else. Some have children and other family members they are scrambling to care for. Others have had to report to job sites and have worked tirelessly to create the food distribution and other systems that are up and running now. Each support professional, teacher and administrator is worried about their students. Many have reached out to students. Here's the wise message Chris Lloyd, president of our teachers' association, sent to his members earlier this week.

***“I know this time is producing anxiety for us and for families and for the young scholars in our care. We entered this profession because we are relationship builders, and we care. And so this time is a test in many ways of our humanity. I am convinced we will get instruction right, no matter what the circumstances, but we must lead with relationships – because the social and emotional well-being of our students and our community is the very foundation of who we are.*”**

“So while we work on how to best instruct tens of thousands of students, we can take this opportunity to do what we always have done ... to let children and families know that we are thinking of them and that we care for their well-being. It's the human thing to do, and in this time, we know our humanity is what makes us whole.”

Many others in our county, the state, and indeed, across the nation have spent the past week trying to figure out how to serve the learning needs and contribute to the well-being of students and families while dealing with their own anxieties and life circumstances. What we know is we will get through this together as a community, and we are better together.



Important Online Resources:

- [MCPS Coronavirus Information and FAQs](#)
- [MCPS Instructional Activities Center](#)
- [MCPS Meal Service Locations](#)
- [External Engagement Resources for Families](#)