



August 9, 2020

To our Gahanna Jefferson Public Schools Community,

We have been keeping our students, staff and families close in our thoughts and our hearts over the past few months. We recognize how disappointing this situation has been and how difficult it is to comprehend all that has happened here and worldwide due to COVID-19.

This letter and attached background is intended to give you a clear picture of the issues our district and our Board have been grappling with since the pandemic began. Please know that as we get closer to our students' first day of school, you will continue to hear **directly from the superintendent, principals and teachers with specific information** about the start of the school year.

We take seriously our role as elected leaders, and our service to the Gahanna-Jefferson school community. It has been one of our shared goals to openly discuss tough issues in committee meetings and board meetings with our community and staff, and we hope you've been able to join us or to [watch those meetings online](#).

Regrettably, some of these issues are not yet resolved, and some still are evolving. Our Board is diverse, and our discussions have been both robust and respectful. What you should know is this: All five members of the board believe that the highest-quality and best education that we can give **all** our students happens when **all** students, teachers and staff safely return to the classroom. Our [district's vision, mission, and beliefs](#) all reflect how important relationships are to learning, and we know those are best formed in-person.

As your school board, our challenge and our responsibility is to create policies that provide for a safe reopening. But like you, we also are parents of school-age children, and we are employees, caregivers and essential workers. We face many of the same struggles as each of you. We recognized early on that we had to put our personal circumstances aside in making decisions that are appropriate for our district. We represent our community, and it is that service that has guided us since March.

We are fortunate to serve a district that values and encourages input from the community. We have carefully considered both survey data and the many one-on-one conversations we have had with many of you. Your opinions have shaped our decision-making, and we understand that the choice to start the year with all students online does not reflect the priorities of some of our survey respondents. On the following information sheet, you can read full details of the factors that impacted our ability to allow families to exercise their chosen options.

We are incredibly grateful to our administrative team for the difficult decisions they make daily to keep students and staff safe and to make sure quality learning continues. Our thoughts are with our building principals, teachers and staff as they begin a school year despite the challenging circumstances we are navigating.

Finally, we want to thank ALL of you for your phone calls, emails and text messages. Your passion for GJPS is clear. We are committed to doing our very best to guide our district successfully through this time; to keep you informed; and to keep our students, families, teachers, staff and community healthy and safe.



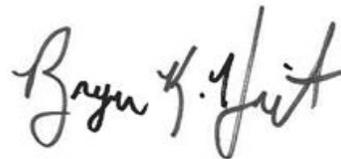
Beryl Piccolantonio
Board President
piccolantonio@gjps.org



Jennifer Chrysler
Board Vice President
chryslerj@gjps.org



Matthew Campbell
Board Member
campbellmp@gjps.org



Bryan Hairston
Board Member
hairstonb@gjps.org



Daphne Moehring
Board Member
moehringd@gjps.org



Gahanna-Jefferson Public Schools

“WHERE STUDENTS COME FIRST”

BOARD OF EDUCATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR BACK TO SCHOOL REOPENING

The Gahanna-Jefferson Board of Education and district administration have consistently relied on many factors in making decisions about the responsible reopening of our schools. This situation has been – and continues to be – ever-changing, and as such, we anticipate that these considerations may evolve again, as our state and community’s experience with COVID-19 changes.

We fully understand the challenges the unknowns create for our school families, and we will do all we can to create workable options going forward and to provide as much notice to our school community as possible. You are encouraged to review [past and future board of education meetings](#) on our www.GahannaSchools.org website.

To provide additional background and context for families, school board members have been working to carefully and responsibly manage the following factors, listed in no particular order, in our decision-making.

Conflict Within Expert Guidance and Recommendations

We understand that guidance and direction coming from numerous perspectives and sources can be confusing.

- **State vs. County vs. Local:** The Governor, Director of the Ohio Department of Health, and Ohio Department of Education have all issued various orders, recommendations and guidance for returning to school and for extracurricular activities. Those state recommendations and mandates were made based on recommendations from public health professionals as well as medical professionals (there are distinct differences between the two).

That statewide guidance was issued with specific instructions for local officials to work with their local health departments using information specific to their county. The Ohio Department of Health created the alert system to help provide guidance to the local authorities when making decisions which includes creating policy for a safe return to school. Each county and local authority has the right to be more restrictive than the state - dependent on the specific circumstances in that location.

Franklin County Public Health issued recommendations based on county-level data, *excluding* the portions of Franklin County that are in the Columbus Public Health jurisdiction. As public health officials, their position is relative to the spread of the virus and threat of the virus within the community. Their recommendations were further clarified to say that each district would have the ability to evaluate their reopen plans based on their specific set of circumstances.

- **Medical Community**

Our administrators reviewed recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics, local pediatricians and medical professionals, as well as our own GJPS nursing staff. All agree that in the broadest context, a safe return to the classroom is in the best interest of the students academically, emotionally and socially. However, there are conflicting opinions and many concerns regarding the district's potential to return to the classroom safely, including:

- The district's ability to socially distance and prevent or reduce the spread of illness;
- The emotional well-being of students in a hybrid model who may have to ride the roller coaster of quarantines and uncertainty;
- Staffing needs for nurses in the buildings to effectively administer care to students who become ill from COVID-19; and
- The spread of the virus to the teachers and staff – and the resulting implications to students as a result of the spread.

Our district also must plan for the fact that this public health guidance may change throughout the school year.

Facility Constraints

As of August 11, 2020, Franklin County is currently classified at an alert level of “red”. The state-level facility guidance for the return to the classroom at a level “red” is six-feet of physical distance between individuals and properly ventilated buildings.

Our aging buildings and supporting facility infrastructure simply are not equipped to meet the guidelines. We worked diligently throughout the summer to evaluate HVAC systems and begin to upgrade them for appropriate ventilation.

We encourage you to watch a presentation our Master Facilities Committee made at a recent board of education meeting. At the 13:00 mark, it includes a [video taken by our high school principal in the hallways](#) at Gahanna-Lincoln High School and shows how difficult maintaining a distance of six feet would be in our high school. We are over capacity in every single building in our district (with the exception of one), to the point that some of our students are learning in modular facilities. This makes it a challenge to maintain safe physical distance.

A majority of families chose the hybrid option in the survey; therefore, our ability to restart under the current facility guidance is limited due to the projected number of returning students and the constraints we face in our buildings.

Liability and Risk

The board has a fiduciary responsibility to evaluate each decision we make - especially in matters involving public health and safety or potential harm to our students and staff. The conflicts in guidance create unique layers of exposure and risk for us that have challenged our legal team and our insurance provider. We may not be able to fully negate the risk of a lawsuit for negligent or reckless action, but we must take steps to reduce the risk and evaluate the level of exposure for each decision that is made.

The way we follow state and local level mandates and guidance is a key factor in liability exposure and has a direct correlation to the amount of risk the district assumes if we reopen. Defending a “reckless” or “negligent” claim that our insurance provider refuses to cover could have severe financial consequences for the district, especially after the state cut \$1.6 million in funding from the district because of the negative economic impact of COVID-19.. There is legislation pending at the state to address the issue of litigation and appropriate insurance coverage, but without that, the liability and risk issues are very real.

Contracts and Negotiations

Our teachers, bus drivers, custodians, and educational aides are hard-working and dedicated, and making decisions that protect their health and safety is a priority. The employment contracts for these professionals *do not include pandemic provisions*. ‘As their employer, we understand and share their concerns, and negotiating changes in a contract in an environment fueled by facts, fear and high emotion, as well as hope and determination, is difficult.

Curriculum

Maintaining the high quality of education during a pandemic is a priority. There is no guidance for mapping state standards to an online or hybrid learning model, or for developing and implementing platforms to transition classrooms in and out of the building depending on the path the pandemic takes over the next year.

Each day brings new information from new sources about the evolution of the pandemic. Gahanna-Jefferson is one of the few districts that is committed to starting the year with our own teachers leading online classrooms. Our administrators believe that this will be a much richer learning experience for all students and will help us shift to a hybrid model and maintain continuity for our students.

We need our curriculum team to be fully focused on implementing the best learning models for our students - both in the short term and the long run. The decision to return to an online learning model gave the curriculum team, the principals and the teachers the benefit of time to plan for and meet our collective goal of a high-quality education experience that can transition as the guidance is updated.

Budget Implications

Several years ago, the board adopted our fiscal beliefs for the district. We cut over \$1 million in administrative costs from our budget and worked to ensure that every dollar we spend is directly related to our students and the classroom. The \$1.6 million state funding cut due to the pandemic had serious implications on our budget, but the district was better prepared to absorb it because of our fiscal accountability. The state warned us to expect another \$1.6 million in cuts again next year due to the pandemic.

More reductions are imminent. We do not have a “rainy day fund” and have been unable to meet one of our fiscal principles to have 60 days of cash on hand for emergencies (such as pandemics), because cuts to meet this principle would have direct and dire consequences in our classrooms. There is no more financial “fat” to trim. Operating in a pandemic has financial consequences that will continue to impact the district.

Extracurricular Activities

After spending time reviewing guidance from the state (both the Ohio Department of Health and OHSA), the county, medical professionals and our legal team, we recently allowed these activities to continue. As with other decisions, decisions about extracurricular activities will continue to be evaluated on an ongoing basis.

As a board, we all share the opinion that extracurricular activities are an important component to education and the educational experience, but we fully acknowledge we must do so in a way that protects the health and safety of everyone involved. These have been among the most challenging conversations our board has had. As with all other aspects of this pandemic - each day brings new information and much to consider.