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Dr. Edwin M. Quezada
Superintendent of Schools

Dear Yonkers Public Schools Employees,

Our school district is about to embark on the *Return to Learn In School 4 Days a Week (R2L4DAYS)* Initiative! Because of your increased direct accessibility, our students will further benefit from your guidance, your nurturing and the cognitive challenges to which you expose them. On our students' behalf, and the rest of the Yonkers Public Schools family, I am very gratified to expand in-person instruction for the balance of this school year.

The decision to offer four days of on-site instruction to current Hybrid students did not come lightly. Nor was it unilateral. It was, however, the natural outgrowth of the phenomenal work performed by our educators, support staff, civil service personnel, and Central Office staff, with the unwavering support of our Trustees. Importantly, it was informed by evolving Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), State and County Departments of Health and New York State Education recommendations.

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR CHILDREN TO RETURN TO SCHOOL?

Dr. Stephen Thomas, Chief of the Infectious Disease Branch at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York stated: "It's becoming a lot clearer that the risk for kids not being in school is much greater than people anticipated. Our kids are going to be paying the price for what COVID-19 has done to socialization and in-person learning long after this thing is no longer a pandemic."

Poor children, children of color, students with disabilities and multi-lingual learners have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, the expanding achievement gap and the digital divide. It is therefore essential that these children return to school and receive the supports required to address their needs.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY ABOUT CHILDREN COMING BACK TO SCHOOL?

In its March 19, 2021, [Operational Strategy for K-12 Schools through Phased Prevention | CDC](#) guidance, the CDC stated:

- In elementary schools, students should be at least 3 feet apart.
- In middle schools and high schools, students should be at least 3 feet apart in areas of low, moderate, or substantial community transmission.
- Removed recommendation for physical barriers.

A new study, published last week in the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, compared the COVID-19 infection rates among nearly 540,000 students and 100,000 staff - all whom engaged in in-person instruction during a four-month period, in 242 Massachusetts school districts. Some districts required at least six feet of separation; others required only three feet of social distancing.

Researchers found no statistically significant differences in infection rates among either staff members or students. The study supports the principle that reducing social distancing can be implemented without negatively impacting student or staff safety, if masks are mandated. Additionally, since early January, the World Health Organization has indicated that one meter (roughly three feet) of separation is enough to aid in preventing transmission. Both of these recent studies support the CDC's recent guidance, and our District's commitment to maintaining the mask or face-covering mandate.

WHAT HAVE WE ACCOMPLISHED TOGETHER?

Though limited by time and space, as we celebrate R2L4DAYS, it's important we also reflect upon some barriers we removed, and mountains we climbed, on our journey to ensure continuity of instructional and support services for our children and families. Through your hard work and commitment to our students' success, Yonkers was the first and only large city school district in the State with a 91% graduation rate in 2020.

Below are a small sample of some milestones we reached together.

Instruction:

- Adapted curricula to ensure lessons were accessible and aligned to the skills and content for each subject area and grade level.
- Developed Power Standards for Academic Success K-8 in ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies.
- Produced guidance documents, PowerPoints, videos, and multiple professional development sessions to move the school instructional agenda, leveraging Microsoft Teams, augmented by Nearpod and Seesaw.
- Transitioned to digital textbooks in Social Studies and in the Elementary Science Program, greatly increasing student access to current resources aligned to the Next Generation Standards.
- Procured grant funding to increase professional learning and to develop a new Rethink website for Yonkers teachers to share their expertise and to access videos of our past staff development offerings.
- Collected and analyzed input from stakeholders for designing instructional models (in-person, hybrid and remote) and associated schedules, which were implemented this year.
- Provided continuity, equity and access to instruction for all learners by adjusting programming based on feedback from administrators, teachers, students and parents.
- Collaborated with an outside consultant to facilitate the efforts of a teacher team in developing thematic units of study entitled "Pandemic Across Time and Space," aligned to Next Generation Standards, and designed for synchronous and asynchronous delivery.

Technology Integration:

- Developed a Distance Learning website and systematically shifted to digital learning, thereby increasing staff proficiency in using primary platforms, and implementing inquiry-based projects districtwide.
- Provided professional development on platforms and applications, including Microsoft Teams, Nearpod and Seesaw; and trained users on Social Studies and Science district-adopted digital programs.
- Developed guidance and set expectations for conducting remote CSE meetings and providing tele-therapy services.
- Coordinated professional development for administrators, teachers, and teaching assistants.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):

- Established the YPS Network for School Improvement (NSI) cohort of teacher teams in 23 schools, focused on improving SEL for middle school students in their math classrooms, through a partnership with Bank Street College.
- Aligned student support services to Wallace Foundation's Partnership for SEL Initiative.
- Established *Disturbing Site/Word Search Review* of loaned devices, to identify and assess students in potential crisis.
- Planned the Annual Artists with Autism Exhibition to display the talents and skills, and promote the social development of students on the Autism Spectrum.
- Developed protocols for managing various behavioral disorders and supported PSTs in their implementation.
- Hosted the Dominican American Millennial panel honoring the experiences, struggles and accomplishments of panelists, while providing guidance and encouragement to students and families.

- Hosted the Black History Month celebration, spotlighting the talents of our students while identifying the many contributions of African Americans, that inspire our young people to become leaders and promote social justice.
- Maintained Yonkers My Brother's Keeper chapters in dozens of District schools.
- Secured grant funding to support students and teachers academically and socially.
- Implemented an Interscholastic Athletic Program through a collaboration among Central Office staff and our high school principals and assistant principals.

Family Supports:

- Collaborated with Nepperhan Community Center, YPIE, WJCS, to support student/parent access to computers and internet connectivity.
- Hosted a Virtual Summer Parent Academy focused on health and wellness, college and career preparedness, student grade level expectations and high school programs.
- Provided over 65 workshops (Benchmark, Microsoft Teams, SchoolWires & Clever Student Portals, PowerSchool, Excel for Beginners, *My Child is Entering 9th Grade, What Should I Expect?*, *Benefits of Bilingual Education*) to support adults seeking new skills and knowledge.
- Presented a Latinx Heritage panel to provide families with information and empower them to advocate for their children, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Distributed over 800 bags of fresh produce and boxed/canned food items weekly from our Grab 'N' Go sites.
- Graduated 145 students with the New York State Seal of Biliteracy in 12 languages last year.
- Raised over \$22,000 for student scholarships through a virtual celebration of My Brother's Keeper Fourth Anniversary event.
- Collaborated with an Optometry community partner, *Eye on Education*, to screen students, resulting in 119 students receiving free eyeglasses.

WHAT ARE SOME BEST PRACTICES STAFF CAN EMPLOY TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER AS WE TRANSITION TO R2L4DAYS?

- Create the space for teachers to share their challenges, learnings and best practices in a structured manner, by adopting a *Pandemic Problems of Practice Protocol*.
- Engage teachers in structured collaboration and consultancy through clarifying and probing questioning, and have them generate solutions to the problems of practice.
- Keep lines of communication open among colleagues and with supervisors.
- Seek out help for yourself and others.
- Observe colleagues who manage to integrate the class participation of online and in-person students, circulating among those who are present and using technology tools like Nearpod, to monitor the learning of individual remote students.
- Identify a friend who knows your hopes and fears and to whom you can turn when you need a thought partner or a critical lens. Find ways you can assist a staff member who needs a little more support during this transition.
- Practice self-care and share your approach with colleagues. This is especially important for adults in caregiving positions. Practicing self-compassion will look different for every educator, depending on their schedule and specific needs, but some ideas include:
 - Plan at least 10 minutes per day to take a break and decompress.
 - Consider practicing mindfulness using meditation recordings or a free mobile phone app.
 - Bring a self-care "emergency pack" to school with different items (such as a stress ball or pictures of happy places) that can help relieve stress.
 - Keep a journal and write in it especially during difficult days when you feel overwhelmed.
 - Find a way to connect with a loved one at least once a day. This can be as simple as texting a significant other, calling a friend, or having dinner with a family member.

Statewide, demand for educational and related services continues to grow, expectations peak along with accountability demands while available resources to respond to needs continue to be inequitably allocated. This scenario requires our school district to make tough choices, while we continue to advocate for changing the allocation formulae. The first choice we have to make is whether to focus decision making on what we **lack**, or what I believe the more empowering choice, is to focus creatively on how we can make optimal use of what we **have** in terms of resources.

This "creative challenge focus," requires we co-construct a more inclusive vision of post pandemic education. This vision embodies two key premises. The first is that we are all responsible for other people's children. Hence, while they are in our care, they are *our* children and should have equitable access to all learning community resources. Secondly, irrespective of our role in the school system, we are also responsible for supporting our colleagues. Responding to those challenges in ways that recognize our respective humanity, is essential to promoting social emotional maturity for our children and ourselves.

Our collective challenge moving forward is to formulate communities of life-long learning within our schools, as a means of fostering life-long learners amongst our graduates. The District is fully committed to effectively addressing the greatest educational, social, mental health and public health demands placed on public education, in generations.

What we know today is that the community we serve is demanding that children return to school for more days of in-person instruction. The elected officials expect our schools open for more days of instruction. Districts across Westchester County are returning to school for more days of instruction.

Therefore, please join me in enthusiastically embracing our R2L4DAYS Initiative, with the following in mind.

- Our teachers, administrators and other staff have done an exceptional job dealing with the pandemic.
- Together, we excelled at addressing all challenges presented instructionally, emotionally and in managing and adapting our infrastructure.
- Our school buildings are in the best condition they've been in, in more than 25 years.
- Over \$12 million was spent to address pandemic related issues.
- Tremendous amounts of technology and PPE were purchased and distributed.
- Most importantly, the research is clear about the need to return students to school.

In closing, thank you for continuing to give our children your creative best. Moreover, I look forward to visiting schools and supporting our students, teachers, administrators and staff. Together, we can create a synergy that results in higher levels of achievement for both children and adults, through our R2L4DAYS Initiative. I thank you for your creativity, dedication and hard work.

Sincerely,



Dr. Edwin M. Quezada

C: President Rev. Steve Lopez, Vice President Dr. Rosalba Corrado Del Vecchio
and Members of the Board of Education