

July 20, 2020

Woodbridge Board of Education Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to further express our concerns regarding the reopening of school, scheduled to occur in just a few short weeks. We hope to provide insight on what in-person instruction would look like in kindergarten, while adding ideas for an engaging distance learning plan.

The kindergarten team at Beecher has always worked tirelessly to provide our students with a warm and welcoming environment as they enter public school for the very first time. In kindergarten, academics are rigorous, but we know children learn best through interactions with other students, hands on exploration and play. Research has consistently shown play-based learning enhances children's academic and developmental learning outcomes. Our kindergarten classrooms are environments in which play and learning go hand in hand. ***Though we certainly understand the necessity of implementing CDC guidelines for safety purposes, it is important to note that, in so doing, much of our approach to teaching and learning will become a casualty of Covid-19.*** Children in our classrooms will no longer be able to engage within cooperative learning groups or participate in partner work, which are extremely important components of our workshop models. Similarly, teachers will not be able to work with students in small groups, making differentiation nearly impossible.

If we are required to fill our classrooms to full capacity, we will become frontline enforcers of CDC guidelines to approximately 18 to 20 four and five year olds. In following these guidelines, children will be expected to remain in one room at a desk all day, while keeping six feet apart from one another and from the teacher. The square footage and seating arrangements necessary to accommodate this dynamic do not exist in our kindergarten classrooms, nor do the desks that each student would require. The only way social distancing could be a possibility is to reduce class size with the implementation of a hybrid model. ***Even under these circumstances, it will be extremely difficult to ensure that students socially distance from one another.*** Kindergarten children, and young children in general, are not developmentally capable of socially distancing themselves from peers throughout the entire school day. Their natural tendency is to interact, socialize and play with others. Following a mask mandate will also prove difficult, if not impossible. Anyone who has worked with young children knows they will inevitably play with their masks, often not even realizing they are doing so. Regardless of scheduled "mask breaks", it is simply unrealistic to expect otherwise. ***How, then, do we ensure our children's safety as well as our own?***

As teachers of our youngest children, it is our natural instinct to reach out to them, to nurture their curiosity, to engage and interact with them in meaningful, productive ways. This involves movement, exploration, lively discourse and play. Given the many restrictions that must be put in place, we are left to wonder what sort of play, if any, will be permitted in the classroom. ***How***

***will children be able to socialize if they are not in close proximity to one another, interacting and sharing materials?*** Even if they are allowed to use items such as legos, blocks, puzzles or games, these will likely need to be used by individual children in isolation, rather than in a shared, collaborative manner. Who will be responsible for sanitizing these materials as well as other classroom equipment? Also, if children are to remain in the classroom throughout the day for cohorting purposes, how/when will cleaning take place?

***Kindergarteners begin school as four and five year olds with needs that are distinctly different from those of older children.*** It is a time to learn important self-help skills (buttoning, zipping, tying, packing and unpacking backpacks/ folders, opening snack/lunch items, etc.) and fine motor skills (using scissors, writing, drawing, etc.). These tasks, often requiring hand-over hand guidance and/or close proximity instruction, are performed and practiced routinely in every kindergarten program. ***How do we assist our children while safely distancing?***

Outdoor instruction has been presented as a possible solution to the many concerns of parents and teachers, research showing that outside interaction is safer than indoors. In theory this may seem like a plausible solution, but in reality all sorts of issues arise. Within the framework of a kindergartener's experiences, going outside means play. That said, it will be very hard for most children to be outdoors and not be allowed to play. Weather will be a factor, not to mention distractions such as insects and bees, as well as bathroom needs. If bathroom use is to be monitored as is recommended, will students need to be accompanied into the building by a teacher? How will these interruptions impact the delivery of instruction taking place, especially when there is only one adult present? Logistically, it will be extremely difficult to space a full class of students six feet apart from one another outdoors in a way that allows them to hear what the teacher is saying and see what is being presented. Also, implementing lessons outdoors will be extremely difficult when much of what is needed for a successful lesson is inside the classroom. ***Switching to an outdoor model of teaching and learning is a creative and interesting prospect, but it requires a great deal of time, thought, planning and materials.***

An unfortunate reality for schools across the country, lockdowns, fire drills and active shooter drills become an even greater concern amid the Covid-19 pandemic. ***If instruction is to take place outdoors throughout the school grounds, what safety protocols will be enacted? Will all teachers be equipped with radios?*** How will we gather our students quickly and safely, yet follow CDC guidelines? The topic of drills is equally problematic indoors. During certain safety practices, kindergarten students are herded into darkened, confined spaces, often for long periods of time. How can we maintain safe distancing and ensure that children keep their masks in place under these conditions? ***With so little time left before the start of the school year, are we properly prepared for these and other eventualities that might arise?***

Kindergarten serves as an important milestone in a child's formal education, as an introduction to the broader school community. Typically an exciting, engaging and nurturing experience, it lays the foundation for healthy social, emotional and academic development and creates lasting

impressions about school and learning. *A school's adherence to the CDC guidelines, while clearly necessary, drastically alters the social and academic landscape, especially for our youngest students.* It cannot and does not allow children the same opportunities and experiences afforded pre-Covid-19. Health and safety protocols will require extensive instruction, modeling, time and practice, school taking on a more clinical feel. *In stark contrast to the warm, lively and interactive experience children have enjoyed in the past, a school dynamic with these kinds of restrictions may actually serve to exacerbate the stress and feelings of social isolation many children may already be experiencing.* This is further compounded when you consider the anxiety many young children feel being away from their families and in a new school setting for the first time. If children are feeling anxious, scared or sad, teachers cannot comfort them in ways we were once able to do. We, too, will be in a constant state of anxiety trying to enforce all the necessary guidelines, knowing a child in the group could be asymptomatic. How are we to perform our job well if we are constantly worrying about getting sick and potentially bringing the virus home to our own families? This is certainly not how any of us envisioned the start of a new school year or the introduction to school for our youngest learners!

The beginning of the year in kindergarten focuses on building a community of learners. Thinking back to the spring, we recall asking ourselves, "How would we ever do this virtually in the fall if we had to?" We have had time to ponder this question more deeply. We would argue that distance learning, though perhaps not ideal, would be more beneficial to kindergarteners right now as opposed to in-person learning with the implementation of CDC guidelines. Teachers and students would be able to see each other's full smiling faces while getting to know one another in a more relaxed way.

If teachers were given time to collaborate as a team and across grade levels to discuss ideas and explore resources, we would absolutely make long distance learning more productive and meaningful.

**We need to begin the work of continuing to build digital competency and best practices by investing professional development in the following:**

- digital community building
- digital competency for students
- building digital routines for students
- multimodal, predictable, and consistent communication with parents
- community and connection among our faculty
- overall instructional design
- methods for small group digital instruction
- methods for assessing student work and progress
- methods for providing helpful, interactive, and consistent feedback
- creating and disseminating kits with non-digital tools for remote learning at home

The world we are now experiencing is certainly one none of us would have believed we would ever see in our lifetimes. Unfortunately, it is our new reality. Attempting to create normalcy given the current situation is near impossible. Teachers, parents and children want school to go back to what we remember. At our core, teachers are caregivers. We want to be back in the building doing what we love and being with our children. However, our sensibility is telling us that this time would be better spent in the development of a more robust distance learning plan as a way to build a classroom community and foster relationships with our students, albeit virtually. This will ensure not only a thoughtful and calm start to the school year, but keep our families and the families at Beecher safe as well. It is important to remember this pandemic will not last forever. What we implement today is only temporary, but necessary for everyone's health and well being.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our thoughts.

Respectfully,

The Kindergarten Team:

Nicole Chick    Megan Cofrancesco    Jeanne Dempsey

Lisa Farnen    Allie Grabowski    Teresa Ramia

To the Woodbridge Board of Education and the greater Woodbridge community:

It is becoming increasingly imperative that our district prioritizes and invests in distance learning this fall. With new information being released daily, [including a large study](#) that supports [Dr. Galvani's findings](#) that children spread the virus at the same rate as adults, it is clear that physically reopening schools in any fashion is not safe or practical. Furthermore, the [CDC has explicitly stated that opening school is at highest risk for spread of virus](#). Additionally, the Yale School of Public Health has reported to Governor Lamont that there are substantial gaps in knowledge about critical aspects of the disease . . ." and that the "closure of schools and the state's stay-at-home order greatly reduced the transmission of the virus."

Even with a rotational or hybrid learning model, we must address the alarming cohorting issues with buses, Extended Day, special education resource teachers, and specialists who work with children from multiple classrooms and grades each day. It is impossible to keep any cohort intact if students are consistently mingling throughout the school day.

Also, staffing issues could grind to a halt any in-person plan, even a rotational model. We will have staff who cannot come back for a variety of reasons. We have many teachers and teaching assistants who are parents of school-aged children and most likely wouldn't be able to participate in a hybrid/rotational setup. When staff members start to get sick and there is no one to cover those classes, what will we do then? How will we serve entire classrooms that need to unexpectedly quarantine? This issue also greatly implicates parents, who will also need to quarantine, given that their child will have been exposed to COVID in school. It takes just one child or educator to contract the virus in school to cause another surge in our communities. When [cases are expected to surge this fall, such a human and financial investment seems to make little sense](#).

While outdoor teaching was an innovative solution that was provided during the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, we must shift our thinking to the issues that lie in 21st century education, first and foremost being safety. We routinely have active shooter lockdown drills. This ever-important safety procedure will be null and void with our entire school population being outdoors everyday. Secondly, 21st century education is active and engaging for students -- they are playing games, singing, working collaboratively, etc. Much of our curriculum at Beecher is focused on small group, personal learning. This fact still raises concern for social distancing measures and how they will be followed in any in-person learning format. We also need to consider special education students and how we will meet the legal requirements of their individualized plans in an outdoor classroom while maintaining the CDC-recommended distancing guidelines. Finally, we now know that COVID-19 is an airborne illness, and with a school population that nears 1,000 students and staff, outdoor instruction still poses significant health risk.

So much of what makes Beecher Road School a "good" place for students is the school culture and relationships. We know your children. We love and care about your children. Any reopening plan must be rooted in the notion that our students will be returning to us

with needs that we do not fully understand just yet. In Massachusetts, three of the state's largest teachers unions have [proposed ideas](#) about how the state should work to achieve a safe learning experience for educators, students, and their families with a phased-in approach.

- Phase One will provide teachers and school staff with ample time for classroom setup, learning about new health and safety protocols, professional development for distance learning and trauma-informed education, and preparing for students' return.
- Phase Two would allow educators to meet the students and their families, either virtually or in-person, providing time for social emotional wellness checks, basic needs assessments, and evaluation of technology needs. This will also provide an opportunity for teachers to reconnect with students and families. ***This work would be the most effective if fully funded public school districts, mental health agencies, and daycares were partnered across Connecticut to provide wraparound services for families statewide.***
- Phase Three will include a return to instruction, either remotely or in person. The plan states that the academic curriculum "should be informed by what students need and by what will engage them," and should be created by ground-level educators.
- Phase Four would be an assessment of educational progress and public health, and should take place six to eight weeks after school starts. In this phase, schools will decide whether to continue as planned or change course.

The proposal also calls for the state to pay for personal protective equipment, along with fully funding existing child care programs so that educators and parents can return to work. The teachers unions are also calling for teacher layoffs to be rescinded, and that all districts should be required to evaluate, upgrade, and repair windows and HVAC systems in their school buildings to meet OSHA standards.

In March, teachers were dropped into a new digital learning landscape without warning. We reinvented school online in a matter of days, and we acknowledge that there are elements that need to be tackled differently in order to shift face-to-face teaching practices to make the most of online learning. We can support a thoughtful, phased-in approach by providing teachers time and professional development **now**, to focus on an effective, interactive, and robust distance learning program. We need to begin the work of continuing to build digital competency and best practices by investing professional development in the following:

- digital community building
- digital competency for students
- building digital routines for students
- multimodal, predictable, and consistent communication with parents
- community and connection amongst our faculty
- overall instructional design
- methods for live, virtual small group instruction
- methods for providing helpful, interactive, consistent feedback and assessments for students
- creating and disseminating kits with non-digital tools for remote learning at home
- access to print books

There are no good solutions for anyone during this global crisis. Many parents who can afford to keep their child out of school, will. Many parents will be forced to send their child back to school, putting their neighborhoods and families at greater risk. The new and conflicting reports being released daily continue to point us toward this message: we do not fully understand COVID-19 and the significant public health risks we are enduring with reopening schools. Our goal is to protect our communities and our most precious asset: our children. We must work as a collective community here in Connecticut to support these communities in order to keep **everyone** safe. Together, we must demand that the government tackle the bigger, underlying issues that manifest themselves in schools.

Thank you,

**Members of Grades 1, 2 and Specialist Teams**

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Nicole Rizzo

Carrie Fanelli

Christina Thompson

Stephanie Goldberg

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Linda Acheson

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July 20th, 2020

Members of the Board of Education,

First, we would like to take the opportunity to thank you for welcoming public comment and allowing for an open discussion at the Board of Education Meeting held on July 15th. We are living in unprecedented times and an open exchange of ideas is essential to making sure we move forward in a way that best suits the needs of our students and our community.

We also want to recognize the great challenge reopening poses during a pandemic. We appreciate the dedication of our administration and the members of the reopening committee to this process.

After having the opportunity to view the district's plan for reopening that has the objective of returning to school at full capacity, in person, and for the full-day, we are gravely concerned. We oppose this plan and support beginning the year in distance learning.

We understand that the state and other stakeholders are looking for safe ways to make in-person learning happen this fall. Unfortunately, there is no way to make it safe for us to return to school for full-day instruction during this pandemic. The concerns addressed in our initial letter to administration have not been solved by the plan that is being put forward. Those concerns are summarized below:

- Capacity concerns on buses and in our building are not being addressed. This goes against the guidelines set forth by the CDC, State Guidelines for Reopening, and likely guarantees new cases of Covid 19.
- All of the CDC recommendations for schools will not be in place (see [Considerations for Schools](#)). Students will not be in smaller groups, they will not be able to adhere to the guidelines of six feet of distance due to lack of space, and it is unclear how the cleaning of the building will take place. It is clear however, that there is already a loosening of the guidelines for social distancing as the plan uses language like "maximized social distancing" and "to the greatest extent possible," when referring to distancing practices in school.
- The plan does not address the limitations of teaching in an in-person model given the protocols that will be in place.
- The plan does not account for the fact that by the time people show symptoms they are already past their peak of infectiousness. Enacting safety protocols once someone is symptomatic is too late.
- The plan is short on specific protocols and does not address how additional costs associated with reopening will be funded.



In addition to our concerns, we feel strongly that Distance Learning addresses many of the challenges that we are facing. First, Distance Learning is the only way we can provide for the safety of our students, their families, and our colleagues. Second, almost everyone who is involved with the planning of the return to school, including our Governor, has said it is likely that we will have to close schools at some point due to increased numbers of Covid cases. If this is the case, it is essential that we place our energy, resources, and focus on building distance learning platforms that are engaging and robust. If we don't choose to focus on this, we will be exactly where we were in March- emergency planning for remote learning.

Our team was able to provide a meaningful learning experience to children even under the extreme circumstances we faced in the spring. It was not perfect, but we learned as we went, and were constantly finding more ways to enhance the experience of our students. We offered learning materials that were easily accessible for students and that offered "one stop shopping." Everything they needed was all in one place. We provided video instruction and live teaching to meet the needs of our grade level and individual students. We worked hard to keep our communities strong and support the social and emotional well-being of children by hosting live activities where students had opportunities to talk with their peers and enjoy time together. We ended the school year having a better understanding of how to provide for our students and countless ideas for next steps. In our conversations as a team and with other colleagues we have developed a list of what we believe is needed for a robust distance learning platform:

- A decision to move to distance learning as soon as possible to allow teachers to focus on preparing rich learning opportunities for students.
- A K-2 digital platform that is effective for younger learners.
- Streamlined resources and materials. Students and parents need to have easy access to all of the materials, lessons, and resources. They should be designed so that students can access them independently (grade 3-6). The number one parent complaint we had early on was that they were having to go to so many different places to access the work for their child. One way this can be accomplished is through the use of Google Classroom and Google Slides.
- Expectations for instructional time and student contact.
- Regular feedback to students and a means for students to easily reach out if they have questions or concerns. This is easily accomplished within Google Classroom.
- Formalize conversations with teachers and parents about what worked and what did not work in distance learning making it possible for us to create plans using what we have learned to build a stronger plan for distance learning.

We all wish to return to business as usual in school, but we are the middle of a pandemic. Distance learning, while not anyone's first choice, is the only safe and effective way to provide the level of instruction and engagement that our students

deserve. At this time, in-person learning would not allow us to teach or students to learn in the way we have come to value and to expect. More importantly, in-person learning takes great risks with the safety of our beloved Beecher Community.

Thank you for taking the time to hear our concerns,

The Fourth Grade Team

Elena Lavigne Jason Nolan Michelle Shepard Michele Waldron

July 20, 2020

Dear Woodbridge Board of Education,

We write to you again today to voice our continued opinion that we should not reopen Beecher Road School this fall using the full in-person model.

Since we last wrote, Governor Lamont held [a press conference](#) in which he tried to reassure teachers, "I've got your back." He enlisted former FDA commissioner Dr. Scott Gottlieb to talk more about the state's plan to reopen schools in the fall.

Dr. Gottlieb's words were anything but reassuring. We wanted to highlight a few points he made:

### **1) "Mixed" data on whether children are spreaders**

In the press conference Gottlieb stated, ["We need to protect the teachers. They are really frontline providers in this setting...while there is evidence that children are less susceptible to contracting the virus, where the data is less certain on their ability to transmit the virus, the data there is mixed."](#)

This no doubt references the research we mentioned in our previous letter about children as possible silent spreaders.

### **2) Lack of certainty that children themselves are indeed low risk**

Gottlieb himself admitted that ["we've deliberately sheltered the children to date and so the overall infection rate among kids may be rather low."](#) Kids for the most part have been home through this whole pandemic. We have not yet put big numbers of children back into indoor spaces for large periods of time. It feels in a way like children, and staff too, are being treated as guinea pigs to see whether this virus will spread in a huge school like Beecher. We don't want to be a part of that experiment and don't want our students to be either.

### **3) Insistence on importance of cohorting**

Gottlieb stated, ["It's important that we keep social networks small...have children stay with the same defined cohort...try to keep those cohorts as small as possible."](#) As we said in our previous letter, it will prove impossible to keep our cohorts as true cohorts with bus transportation, Extended Day, and special education legal requirements. So if Gottlieb insists that we need kids to stay in cohorts for this to work, what happens to this plan when faced with the reality that we can't actually stay in protected cohorts?

### **4) Prediction that we will need to return to distance learning sometime soon**

This is a point Dr. Gottlieb kept reiterating. He stated ["I would think that at some point this is going to become epidemic again in some fashion in the Northeast...But if we can get two](#)

months of school in, three months of school in, even one month of school in that's going to be important." This is a point Governor Lamont echoed later in the press conference as well. So if we all know we will need to go back to distance learning soon, why jeopardize students and staff by returning them to unsafe conditions in the meantime? How many Beecher students and staff will become infected before we decide it's time to shut down? It's a risk we're not interested in taking.

While an argument can be made that at least starting school in person could be beneficial for students, there are also counter arguments to that point. For example, if students return to Beecher Road school in the fall, it will barely resemble what they know and love about Beecher. It will be sterile and cold. Their teachers won't be able to get close to them. They won't get one-on-one help. They won't get much needed hugs on a bad day. Is that really in the best interest of students?

As educators, we know that kids need and crave consistency. It feels cruel to bring them back into school for a month or two only to hastily shut down again. It was traumatic when it happened in March. We can't imagine it would be any better this fall.

And a final point on this: parents will demand improvements in distance learning. We know this and understand it. But how will we have the time to plan for distance learning if we start the year back in school? We will spend all of our time between now and the start of school trying to modify every single activity and school procedure under the new guidelines. We will spend our time examining every inch of our classroom to maximize social distancing. We may even start trying to figure out how to logistically hold 850+ students in our outdoor spaces. There would be no time to work collaboratively to build a more robust distance learning program. Instead, we will most likely be thrust back into distance learning with a moment's notice and will not have had the time to plan for improvements.

Since we wrote last week, the numbers in Connecticut keep rising. Our country is experiencing record numbers. It's time we act realistically and with the health and safety of our staff and students as the priority. .

Thanks for your consideration,

**The Third Grade Team**

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