



Office of the Superintendent

Essex County Public Schools
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804-443-4366

April 15, 2021

Greetings Essex Schools Family:

I write to provide you with an overview of our plans for teaching and learning for the 2021-2022 school year. Recently, Governor Northam signed senate bill 1303, which legally requires five days of in-person instruction for school divisions across the Commonwealth, beginning with the 2021-2022 school year. Therefore, Essex Schools has begun the planning process to accommodate students for in-person instruction every day of the week, beginning August 16. However, the signed legislation also gives school divisions the option of offering virtual instruction, concurrent with in-person instruction, when the new school year begins.

In order to meet the varying academic needs of our diverse body of learners, Essex County Public Schools will also offer virtual instruction for the 2021-2022 school year. We feel that it is prudent to offer both in-person and virtual instruction, to best support our students and to mitigate enrollment loss. Therefore, we are planning to offer virtual instruction through a partnership with a learning management system (LMS) vendor. An LMS is a public or private educational entity, which offers virtual instruction in the K-12 space (in higher education in some cases as well). The decision to use an LMS vendor is because we do not believe that it is reasonable for our faculty and staff to continue providing both in-person and virtual instruction, concurrently, without a planning day during the course of a week. We are in the process of selecting an LMS vendor provider, and we have selected a committee of teachers, parents and administrators to provide a recommendation to me, concerning the vendor best positioned to meet the needs of our students. Once we select a vendor or even the possibility of more than one vendor, we will thereafter refer to this arrangement as the Essex Schools Virtual Academy.

To most effectively plan for both in-person and virtual instruction, we will begin to gather information from our families concerning the mode of instruction desired. To gather such information, we will deploy a series of surveys to gauge family interest in either the virtual or in-person instructional format

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for learning. The survey results will allow us to properly plan and direct resources to support our students.

If through the survey results students/families convey an interest in the Essex Schools Virtual Academy, be advised that there will be an application process to be approved. The application process will consider several variables, and will highly weigh past academic success within the virtual mode of instruction. Please, also be advised that the selection of a mode of instruction for the fall of 2021 will be a semester-long commitment.

Finally, there has been a significant increase in COVID cases and COVID-related developments in the community and unfortunately now, into our buildings. I have asked the Department of Human Resources to send out a notice to address some misconceptions about COVID transmission, and best practices to keep in mind. Please know as I have always attempted to demonstrate, I will not hesitate to make tough decisions to keep our students and staff safe.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dr. Harry R. Thomas III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a distinct "III" at the end.

Dr. Harry R. Thomas III
Division Superintendent