



Dear Commissioner Riley:

On Friday, February 26th, the Middlesex League Superintendents discussed your announcement for a full return of elementary students to in-person learning by April 2021. Currently, our districts are engaged in conversations about what a full return might look like, as is appropriate to the local context. There is nothing that we want more than for all of our students and staff to return to schools full time; however, your declaration without a thoughtful plan only exacerbates the challenges we face in schools and belies the current reality of the situation in which we find ourselves.

We are nearing the first anniversary of the Middlesex League Superintendents' decision to close schools on March 12, 2020, which predated the Governor's school closure order a day later. Initially, we believed it would be a proactive two-week school closure to combat COVID-19. When it became clear that the pandemic would require long-term planning and adjustments, superintendents throughout the Commonwealth advocated for a uniform plan for a fall return. Throughout the pandemic, most of the educational decision-making has been left to local districts, creating a high degree of variability. If the State had dictated a common starting point in August, making uniform adjustments now would be far less complicated and intrusive.

During the pandemic, school districts have been left to their own devices. In the absence of concrete plans from the State, we became increasingly more reliant on one another. In a nutshell, school leaders were told by the State to cover only essential standards, reduce the maximum bus capacity to approximately 30%, "pressure test" desks at three feet, and develop three teaching and learning models: full return, hybrid, and remote learning—all of which we have done. The unintended consequence of allowing school systems to work individually has resulted in understandable variations from community to community. There was little guidance at the beginning of the school year about how districts would reopen, which may be why there are approximately 400,000 students in the State who have yet to return to their classrooms.

Many unanswered questions and concerns must be addressed, such as a lack of guidance around lunch and other unmasked activities (3 ft. v. 6 ft.); the possible disruption of Special Education services already scheduled; potential issues with existing Memorandum of Agreements with our teachers and other collective bargaining units; and disparate recommendations between local Boards of Health, State health agencies, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the World Health Organization that have yet to be addressed.

Moreover, we have advocated strongly for vaccines for educators through the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, yet there is still no response or plan to vaccinate our staff. We need a mindful and strategic vaccination plan for our employees, which would make it easier to undertake another shift to full in-person learning for elementary students. Furthermore, we must be thoughtful about when and how public school employees will access vaccination appointments when they become available.

We, along with many others, remain hopeful that the new Johnson & Johnson vaccine will provide another option that can be more easily distributed and prioritized for educators and staff. It would go a long way if the single-dose vaccine were distributed to local Boards of Health and administered to school personnel in school buildings. To further minimize disruptions to learning, it may be wise to vaccinate educators and other staff after typical school hours, such as Friday evenings from 2:00-8:00 p.m. This type of approach would minimize the need for substitute coverage during the school day and allow employees two days over the weekend to recover, which could minimize the potential for additional

classroom coverage challenges. A concrete vaccination timeline is not the only way to get students back to full-time in-person learning, but it certainly will facilitate the process for a full return of students.

As we began this journey last March, we committed ourselves to work together to support students, staff, and families. Since March of last year, we have worked tirelessly and collaboratively with all stakeholders in our respective communities, and we will continue to do so in the future. As educational leaders, we know the pandemic hasn't been easy on anyone. We look forward to partnering with you to offer the highest quality education to our students.

Sincerely,

John Macero, Superintendent, Stoneham Public Schools  
John Phelan, Superintendent, Belmont Public Schools  
Glenn Brand, Superintendent, Wilmington Public Schools  
John Doherty, Superintendent, Reading Public Schools  
Deanne Galdston, Superintendent, Watertown Public Schools  
Judy Evans, Superintendent, Winchester Public Schools  
Julie Hackett, Superintendent, Lexington Public Schools  
Matt Crowley, Superintendent, Woburn Public Schools  
Douglas Lyons, Superintendent, Wakefield Public Schools  
Kathleen Bodie, Superintendent, Arlington Public Schools  
Julie Kukenberger, Superintendent, Melrose Public Schools  
Eric M. Conti, Superintendent, Burlington Public Schools