

Dear Simsbury Staff and Parents/Guardians:

With just about two weeks left in the school year, we can all see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. Given the hard work and stress that has gone into teaching and learning remotely, I know that there will be an even greater sense of relief for everyone when summer begins.

A few weeks ago, I wrote to you about our structures around the planning for an eventual reopening of the Simsbury Public Schools. Two separate teams have been formed – one focused on safety, operations and logistics and the other on the teaching and learning process. The Return to Simsbury Schools Task Force is the group charged with all the behind-the-scenes work that will need to happen to open schools safely, and it met for the second time this week. Right now, I would describe that team as focused on scenario planning and procurement of necessary items (PPE, sanitizing machines, hand sanitizer, additional technology, etc.). Guidance for limited summer school opportunities was released by the state last week, and that document was our first outline for what the fall might look like. Of course, it is too early for us to report out with any firm plans as we will need to wait for further direction from the Governor and Commissioner of Education. When the time comes for us to release more information about our plans, it is my hope that you have confidence that the RSS Task Force is prioritizing the safety of students and staff.

The Reopen Simsbury Teaching and Learning Team has also met for a second time and is digesting all the great information it received by surveying parents and teachers about the distance learning experience this spring. Please know that we have added parent representation to the RSS Task Force, and the Teaching and Learning Team will also be including parental voice in the summer months as its "tiered" approach to the work unfolds. As Superintendent, I take great pride in the early work of these teams as they persevere through both great complexity and numerous unknowns.

The Board of Education reached an important milestone this week in the process to develop a long-range facilities master plan. After nearly 20 public meetings on the subject, including three open Public Forums held prior to the school closures, the Board reached a decision about the "best first step" to take in addressing the aging condition of our schools, especially at the elementary level. On Tuesday night, the Board unanimously voted to direct Tecton Architects to complete the long-range facilities master plan for the Simsbury Public Schools by prioritizing the option of a 6th grade addition to Henry James and a renovate-as-new project at Latimer Lane as the first capital improvement projects in the timeline. Allow me a few lines to describe for you what this vote means and what it doesn't. By directing Tecton to complete the plan in this manner, the Board found compelling evidence (through surveys of staff and community members, demographic analysis, presentations by administration, and focus groups discussions with 6th grade teachers) that the academic and developmental needs of students in 6th grade can be best met at the middle level as opposed to elementary school.

However, there is a long way to go before this configuration could be brought to reality. After Tecton completes the master plan, which will outline a 15-20 year timeline to address the physical renewal of our elementary schools, the BOE will present it to both the Board of Selectman and the Board of Finance. The BOF will conduct modeling exercises to analyze the town's ability to fund identified capital improvement projects over the long-term. Of course, the economic impact of COVID-19 will be a part of those discussions, and it's likely that a thoughtful long-range plan might need to become even longer.

Decisions will need to be made about when a referendum on the first project(s) could reasonably be scheduled. Even with a successful referendum vote, it takes several years to bring a school construction project from design to occupancy. Into the fall and over the next few years, the district will closely monitor any upward enrollment trends at the elementary level – especially at Latimer Lane – and develop contingency plans to address concerns about capacity.

So, while we are quite excited that the BOE reached this important decision about 6th grade placement and prioritizing Latimer Lane as the elementary school most in need of attention, it will take some time and additional community conversations to see progress. I'll close by thanking everyone in the community and on our faculty who contributed to the rich public discussions about our facilities that have taken place over the last 18 months. We have a road map for moving forward.

I hope that you enjoy another beautiful weekend – preferably with a little less screen time!

Sincerely,

Matt Curtis
Superintendent of Schools