

Superintendent's Back-To-School Letter

September 3, 2020

Dear Dobbs Ferry Community Members,

Given what's been happening in the world and education these past six months, I can't help but think of the old Chinese saying "May you live in interesting times," as it relates to the upcoming 2020-2021 academic year. School as we know it will not be the same, but learning opportunities remain, even if delivered in a new and novel way.

Things will continue to change and even the best reopening plans will evolve, to meet the needs of our students and community. School districts take their directives and guidance from Governor Cuomo's office, the NY State Department of Education (NYSED) and state and local health departments. While we all agree about the value of returning to in-person learning, caution, flexibility, and continuing due diligence are essential in making informed decisions.

The Dobbs Ferry School District is looking forward to welcoming our students back-to-school on Tuesday, September 8th, and our #1 priority is to ensure that all our returning students and staff are safe and COVID-free. Our #2 goal is to stay open. To try and mitigate the chance of infection during the foreseeable future, we need your help to keep our school family healthy.

Prior to entering any school buildings, we are requiring all employees, parents, students and visitors to complete a mandatory health screening assessment at home, including a temperature check, before departing for school. This will be completed using a web-based application that can be done on a computer or smartphone, and only takes a few minutes. Please take the online medical assessment every morning before leaving for school. Click on <https://entry.neric.org/dobbsferryschools>

The District will be conducting random temperature checks of students each day using handheld devices and contact-free temperature kiosks located at all the school entrances. If an individual presents with a temperature of greater than 100.0°F, the individual will be denied entry into the building, or sent directly to a dedicated waiting area, prior to being picked up or otherwise sent home.

The few minutes it takes to complete this assessment can mean the difference between keeping our schools open, or having to go to 100% remote learning for all. We know you understand the importance of this request, and the need for universal compliance. It is also

extremely important that we all remain vigilant and continue to wear facemasks and maintain social distancing, even when out and about locally, so that we can continue with in-person instruction. According to health officials, it is clear that masks *plus* social distancing are the most effective preventative measures.

For the 2020-2021 school year, we are delighted to welcome 124 new kindergarten students to Springhurst Elementary School this fall. Principal Julia Drake held a wonderful in-person social distancing variation on the annual Kindergarten Visiting Day in the all-purpose room. Our youngest students and their parents were able to talk to kindergarten teachers, become familiar with the building and even meet some of the other children in their class. Similar back-to-school transition and orientation experiences also took place for incoming Middle School 6th graders and 9th grade High School freshmen.

District administrators and teacher mentors also hosted new staff members in the HS/MS Library Media Center for a District “meet n’ greet”. We have two new School Media Specialists in both the Springhurst (Lauren Rodriguez) and High School/Middle School (Ellen Elsen) Libraries to kick-off the school year. They are available to students both in-school and remotely to help with research and projects. Our Capital Project encompassing the new Springhurst Library renovation is still moving forward and we are finishing up the design phase and are submitting plans to SED as the next step.

Other staff members joining the District include Springhurst Music Teacher Nate Wardlaw and First Grade Teacher Alyssa Santana. We also welcome Gabrielle Tobacco, Speech/Language leave replacement at Springhurst; Claire Wang, Math Teacher at the Middle School; Caitlyn West, classroom leave replacement and Molly Connett, classroom leave replacement at Springhurst.

Along with physical health and well-being, we feel strongly that social emotional well-being needs to be a priority during this transitional time, and for as long as necessary, to appropriately support both students’ and staff members’ needs. All District staff will have completed Social Emotional Learning (SEL) training before the beginning of the school year. Teachers and staff will be participating in a highly recommended mental health support program called Psychological First Aid (PFA). PFA provides intervention strategies and skills to help children, adolescents, adults, and families in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The District will continue its focus of the last 18 months on race and equity. We will be working with Natalie Zwerger from the NYU Steinhardt Center for Strategic Solutions on these issues. Natalie has two decades of experience as an educator and advocate. She leads a team that provides national workshops, trainings, and support promoting equity and

racial justice. Her expertise includes developing critical consciousness, combatting implicit bias, and dismantling systems of oppression in educational settings.

This year's Superintendent's book club choice, "The Warmth of Other Suns" by Isabel Wilkerson, is a National Book Critics Circle Award Winner and gives historical context and reinforces our goal to become a more inclusive community. In this epic, beautifully written masterwork, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author chronicles one of the great untold stories of American history: the decades-long migration of black citizens who fled the South for northern and western cities, in search of a better life. Our Race Matters Committee (formerly our District Equity Committee) will be expanded to include additional diverse stakeholders and a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and/or People of Color) student union is a goal for this year as a way to elevate and leverage student voice. Our BIPOC Affinity Group will continue to meet and provide a safe space for our staff.

The primary focus for all teachers and staff at the High School, Middle School and Springhurst for the 2020-2021 school year is to provide Dobbs Ferry students with the highest quality instruction possible, using developmentally appropriate and differentiated learning models for each age-group. This focus and goal is paramount to our success no matter which "plan" our students are participating in.

The challenges ahead are extraordinary and I know that our community recognizes that there will be no perfect answers. Our teachers, administration, support staff and Board of Education have worked tirelessly over the summer to make sure we have everything in place to have a successful school opening.

Thank you Dobbs Ferry parents and community for your patience, confidence and support. We look forward to new beginnings and the new school year.

Sincerely,

Lisa Brady, Ed.D.
Superintendent