

SUPERINTENDENT BACK-TO-SCHOOL WELCOME 2020

Wagner Marseille, Superintendent, Cheltenham School District

Reprinted with permission of Dr. Wagner Marseille, Superintendent of the Cheltenham School District in Cheltenham, Pennsylvania

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Dear Cheltenham Families:

Welcome to the 2020-2021 school year. This is a very different type of welcome letter than I had initially imagined. After we closed our doors on March 9 for deep cleaning and Governor Wolf ordered the closure of all schools on March 13, my hope was that as a country, we would make the needed gains in COVID-19 mitigation efforts so all of our students and staff could return to their buildings for the start of this school year.

As spring made its way to summer, it became apparent we would have to begin the school year in a virtual model. We expect to maintain this operating model until winter break, and I am hopeful, yet again, that we can return to in-person instruction on Monday, Jan. 4, 2021.

By now, you should have received warm greetings from your child's principal, a class schedule and the district's [remote learning plan](#), which provides detailed information on 14 core areas. The CSD Office of Education, in conjunction with this summer's curriculum and instruction subcommittee, has worked hard to develop a detailed, resource-rich guide to assist you in navigating the CSD virtual experience.

As always, this is your plan and we want your feedback. In the spirit of continuous improvement, CSD will release a survey to staff, students and families in September for input about their experience with remote learning. We will also reconvene our school reopening committees (Curriculum and Instruction, Health and Wellness, Operations, and Student Activities and Sports) to discuss and reflect on those findings.

With your input, in conjunction with the ever-changing guidance from local and national health agencies, we will have to pivot quickly and adjust accordingly. Just this week, the [CDC](#) provided guidelines with regard to [COVID-19 exposure](#), and the Pennsylvania Department of Education shared modified guidelines for the [use of facemasks](#). The Pennsylvania Department of Health has released an interactive [COVID-19 Early Warning Monitoring System Dashboard](#) to provide districts with information needed to support ongoing decisions regarding school openings. The data utilized includes, but is not limited to, transmission, incident and positivity rates.

We acknowledge the first three months of our students' virtual school will be like no other they have ever experienced. We understand the need to establish structure, build a sense of community, re-establish connections and practices, and allow the space to address students' lived experiences. In addition, we must tend to their social emotional needs as we simultaneously address their learning needs.

With that in mind, during my opening remarks to staff this week, I shared the work of [Dr. Sharon Ravitch](#), professor of practice at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. Dr. Ravitch developed her "flux pedagogy framework," which calls for a radical way of doing, thinking, and being. She writes, "[Flux pedagogy](#) is a mindset and corresponding set of practices that allow educators to seek out, develop, and enact new strategies in our course design and pedagogical approaches. It requires an adaptive and compassionate leadership approach to teaching that views our classrooms (even our virtual ones) as complex adaptive systems of care."

I stressed with our staff that educators committed to flux pedagogy possess a growth mindset responsive to equity, racial

literacy, and fixed mindsets that often form our implicit and explicit biases.

With the continued political, social, economic and medical unrest across our country's landscape, comprehending the depths of the destruction we have experienced is difficult. Students are coming to our virtual doors with histories of trauma seeking answers to their many questions. Our students continue to witness and experience social injustice and a blatant disregard for human life. Dare I say, I have not witnessed injustices on this scale in my lifetime. In Kenosha, Wisconsin, on August 23, African American Jacob Blake was shot seven times in his back in front of his 3-, 5- and 8-year-old children. In my May 31 letter, I asked "Where is our humanity when we see the senseless loss of life?" Yet, in less than three months, here we are again, living in the perpetual cycle of wash, rinse and repeat racism.

In 1963, famed African-American novelist, playwright, essayist, poet and activist [James Baldwin](#) shared his perspective on the "challenges of the Negro" and stated, "[i]t is not true the color of your skin has any more importance at all in a human life. I know that people have perished because of the color of their skin, but it's not because of the color of their skin really. But because of the value placed on it."

Events continuing to play out across this country are the direct result of the value (or lack thereof) attributed to the lives of people of color. That is why "Black Lives Matter." It's not because the other colors in the rainbow don't matter; it's a declaration that whiteness is valued above Blackness. You can't say "All Lives Matter" when history and current events show otherwise. Many are not ready to embrace this concept and experience denial. The award-winning author, historian and race and discriminatory policy scholar [Dr. Ibram X. Kendi](#), who penned "[How to Be an Antiracist](#)" and "[Stamped from the Beginning](#)" says, "Denial is the heartbeat of racism." It is those who failed to listen to the words of [Elie Wiesel](#), author, political activist, Nobel laureate, and Holocaust survivor, when he stated, "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the center of the universe."

The center of our universe must be the classrooms. What we do there reflects what we do out there. In so many ways, our K-12 system is a microcosm of the world. So, as we welcome students and families to this new learning model in today's traumatic environment, I tasked our staff to re-examine practices, behaviors, attitudes, dispositions, ideas, and ideology more than ever and encouraged them to become more connected with our inner self and those students we have the pleasure of serving. I have charged all of us with the following:

1. **Commit** to flux pedagogy as we continue to examine the intersection of teaching, learning, and identity.
2. **Embrace** true compassion and self-care for each other and our families from a lens free of judgment and bias.
3. **Reopen** our hearts and minds to a student-centered space to actively and intentionally listen to the often silent voices of our students.
4. **Strengthen** our racial literacy through the framework of [reading, recasting, and resolving](#).
5. **Transition** from safe spaces to brave spaces where we create more authentic conversations and become comfortable with having uncomfortable conversations.

What will be your charge for a better today, a better 2020-2021 and better tomorrow?

Sincerely,

Dr. Wagner Marseille
Superintendent of Schools

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