August 12, 2020

TO: Superintendent Paul Defendini and the Farmingdale Board of Education

With less than a month before Labor Day, school districts are scrambling to refine reopening plans, address the needs of students and staff who fall within the high-risk and/or medically vulnerable population, secure additional personnel, obtain PPE, respond to guidance that seems to change on a daily basis – the list goes on and it is a daunting task. We recognize the sheer magnitude of the work and the issues being created that must be addressed in real-time, putting a fiscal strain on the District, and a mental strain on the District personnel deeply involved in the process. We also recognize that regardless of what reopening looks like in your district, stakeholders (students, parents, and staff) will have concerns with respect to how well the plan ensures their safety. Below are ten key points that every District must address before any reopening plan is implemented for the 2020-2021 school year.

1. Guidelines are the minimum standards; they should not be considered a ceiling. Six feet of social distancing must be maintained in any area where possible (e.g., all classrooms, lunchrooms, gymnasiums, libraries, school buses). Masks or face coverings should be a mandatory component of any plan. Plastic barriers are NOT an adequate alternative to social distancing and mask wearing, and should be used in addition to, not in lieu of, those other measures.

2. NYSED guidance includes the use of cohorts to keep a static environment and must be an integral part of any plan. This practice limits interactions between students and staff, and plans should identify the spaces to be used for non-instructional time (e.g. study halls, lunch, preparation periods).

3. Engagement of Stakeholders – Governor Cuomo called for a minimum of three meetings with parents and one meeting with staff to review the reopening plans. Stakeholders should continue to be an integral part of the process with refining plans and the sharing of information.

4. Adequate time must be scheduled for training of ALL personnel, including substitute employees. A few days of professional development at the beginning of the school year is not enough. This
must be an ongoing process. A delay of the school year for students may be required to properly accomplish this.

5. Protocols required by the NYSED “Mandatory Assurances” survey in areas of Health & Safety, Facilities, Child Nutrition and Teaching & Learning must immediately be made available to staff and the public. These must be conspicuously posted on the district website.

6. For many families, transportation is a critical component of the education system, and there are 18 mandatory assurances required for this topic. Districts must be transparent with how they will assure those requirements are met. Students from all grades are exposed every day to each other on the bus. Regardless of the inconsistencies between agency guidelines, for the safety of all stakeholders, masks AND social distancing on the bus must be maintained. We cannot rely on students to keep their masks on throughout the trip. Merely opening the window is not sufficient for adequate ventilation. A written plan made public on the district website as well as communicated at the public meeting with the District personnel responsible for transportation, and if applicable a representative from the contractor available for questions.

7. There must be a comprehensive plan, made public, with respect to screening students, staff, and visitors and quarantining protocols for anyone that has a positive response to the screening protocols. The plan must also include how the district will ensure testing of any symptomatic or exposed individual, as required by DOH guidance.

8. Contact tracing is vital to minimizing the spread of COVID-19. Contact tracing cannot be limited to the four walls of a classroom. When a positive case is identified, districts must be able to immediately identify anyone who may have been exposed, in any location utilized by students and staff, including on buses, and share that information with the DOH. The District’s plan must identify who is responsible for contact tracing.

9. A tremendous amount of effort has gone into the development of plans, protocols, and policies related to Health & Safety and other aspects of the educational program; however, their success relies on the compliance of all stakeholders. Districts should have a zero-tolerance policy on non-compliance with the various written protocols and policies that have been developed to assure the well-being of our students and staff.

10. Provide appropriate alternate job accommodations/adjustments for staff with ADA qualifying conditions that put them at additional risk.

The ten points outlined in this letter are imperative for reopening plans in all school districts. If a district is unable to meet these ten points, they should consider starting remotely and gradually phase into the hybrid/in-person plan or delay the start of school until they can demonstrate they can meet the nine points. We stand for the safety of our members, and we stand together for the safety of all students and families.

Sincerely,

Cordelia Anthony
President, Farmingdale Federation of Teachers