

August 1, 2020

Dear Superintendent Conrad, School Committee, Principals of Bedford Schools:

We write to you as parents of students enrolled in Bedford Public Schools, and we share significant concerns regarding the Bedford Public Schools Draft Reopening Plan for Fall 2020 (hereinafter, Draft Plan), dated July 31, 2020.

This letter is written with the understanding that we all have the best interests of children enrolled in Bedford Public Schools in mind. We appreciate the difficulty faced by administrators during these unprecedented and unusual times, but we are concerned that the Draft Plan, as currently conceived, does not adequately address the needs of the entire community.

Specifically, the Draft Plan does not provide inclusive and equal learning opportunities for students who must learn remotely, whether due to a protected disability, parent choice, or other individual situation, and it is not flexible enough to accommodate the uncertainty of a rapidly changing public health landscape.

Critically, the Draft Plan does not comport with the letter or the spirit of the Remote Learning Guidance for Fall 2020 issued by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE Guidance) on July 24, 2020, pursuant to 603 CMR 27.08(3)(b), which sets forth three guiding principles: the safety of students and educators, equitable treatment of all students, and maintaining connections between school staff, students, and families. While any remote-only option prioritizes safety per the first guideline, the Draft Plan, as written, completely ignores the remaining principles. The Draft Plan does not provide inclusive and equal learning opportunities for students who must learn remotely, whether due to a protected disability, parent choice, or other unique individual situation, and it is silent on any efforts to maintain the abovementioned connections. The Draft Plan provides unequal learning opportunities for remote-only students. This is impermissible under both the DESE Guidance and 603 CMR 27.08(3)(b), and is possibly in violation of Article II of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

As has been discussed in numerous forums, DESE Guidance directs school districts to plan for three options, including an all-remote option, for the upcoming school year. Your data, from early July, suggests that approximately 15% of Bedford families would select an all-remote option regardless of the plan chosen by the Bedford School District (the District) (District Plan pg. 11). The guidance and recommendations regarding COVID-19 are rapidly evolving given the virus's recent resurgence, and a corresponding shift in which parents increasingly seek out an all-remote option is very likely underway. We also share concerns regarding the wording of the survey question, and we suspect that it did not capture all of the families who would elect the District-provided remote option. Leaving that aside, it is clear that a significant percentage of Bedford families will, for varying reasons, seek out a fully remote option for their children.

The remote option offered by the District must, in accordance with DESE Guidance and consistent with 603 CMR 27.08(3)(b), provide "regular, consistent opportunities to access live,

synchronous instruction, student-to-student interaction, collaborative assignments/projects, teacher feedback, and other needed supports.” (pg. 5). The performance criteria must be consistent across all learning environments (pg. 6), and it may be selected by parents for any reason, whether based on a protected disability category or otherwise. (pg. 4). The Draft Plan fails these fundamental requirements.

Our review of the Draft Plan suggests that the District has set forth two wholly separate remote learning plans, one of which is far inferior to the other. Rather than make a consistent choice for remote learning for all students, Bedford has offered a full-time remote program with a synchronous, school-based staffing model for students who participate in remote learning due to School Committee decision and a separate remote program with an asynchronous, third-party based staffing model for students whose parents elect remote learning in the event the School Committee elects an in-person or hybrid model. This different treatment of students, based solely on their parents’ election of remote learning (which often is a result of medical fragility or protected disability status), simply cannot stand. We encourage the District to provide the same programming—that which corresponds to the first plan described below—to any student who must learn remotely.

The first plan—referred to as the “All Remote Plan” in the Draft Plan and Option 1 in the DESE Guidance—suggests an increasingly robust version of the remote learning provided by the District in this past spring. If the School Committee elects to go fully remote, either at the start of the school year or a later date, the Draft Plan suggests that students will continue to learn through synchronous and asynchronous teaching provided by Bedford Public School teachers “using a combination of teacher-directed learning . . . as well as independent learning.” (pg.

10). Under this plan, students will continue to benefit from the District’s curriculum, receive feedback on their work, and participate in specials including Art, Music, and PE/Health. (pg. 10- 11). Essentially, this method of remote instruction reflects the intent, spirit, and legal obligations of the DESE Guidance, and would offer families a satisfactory option for all-remote learning.

In contrast, the Learning Management System Plan (the LMS Plan) provides for no such benefits. DESE’s Option 5, which is the basis for Bedford’s LMS Plan, is intended for districts with “limited technology and system infrastructure to create and oversee a fully remote program” and for districts where students are not expected to move between two different programs (e.g., between the LMS Plan and the All Remote Plan). The LMS Plan was not intended for districts such as Bedford, where access to technology following the District’s distribution of Chromebooks this spring is high, and where it is likely that students will move from the asynchronous LMS Plan into the synchronous All Remote Plan with their peers and teachers, should the All Remote Plan go into effect. As DESE explains, an LMS Plan “does not lend itself to students moving between [models] unless the district decides to adopt the LMS- provided curriculum for all students.” (pg. 14).

The District did not decide to adopt the LMS-provided curriculum for all students; rather it mandated this curriculum under the Draft Plan only to those families opting for a fully virtual

program regardless of School Committee decision, thereby removing such families almost entirely from the Bedford school community in which they are heavily invested. The LMS Plan is a poor substitute for a district-designed and district-run remote program. For example, there is no requirement for synchronous and asynchronous instructions with a Massachusetts- certified teacher; rather, learning is “largely self-directed and asynchronous” with no mention at all of teacher credentials. This curriculum, according to DESE Guidance, “is not aligned with district curriculum.” (pg. 14). Further, the Draft Plan vaguely requires “a few staff to monitor and facilitate student progress as a link between Bedford Public Schools and the LMS” (Draft Plan pg. 12), which shows a lack of planning and forethought and likely does not meet the DESE requirements to monitor and facilitate student progress, provide additional support, and possibly provide tutoring or other live, synchronous opportunities. With limited involvement by Bedford teachers and administrators, there is no possibility that this program, administered by an unknown third party, lives up to the exceedingly high standards set by the Bedford School District; it cannot be considered an adequate substitute. It is simply not good enough.

Notably missing from the LMS Plan is the opportunity for students to participate in essential peer-to-peer groups, virtual social settings, and breakout sessions. The model, heavily reliant on parent participation and autonomous learning, ignores the essential learning—socially, emotionally, and academically—that comes from consistent exposure to one’s peers. Students are left without this necessary interaction at a time when isolation is especially widespread and a major hindrance to a student’s development. A Bedford-run plan, such as the one provided as an option if the School Committee elects remote-learning, provides for the continued growth of these crucial interactions and relationships.

Further, the Draft Plan is inflexible and does not meet the needs of the community during a rapidly evolving public health crisis. Both the Draft Plan and DESE Guidance highlight this significant shortcoming by acknowledging the inability for students to transition from the LMS curriculum to the Bedford curriculum without significant disruption. DESE Guidance mandates that districts allow for the transfer from remote learning to the learning option exercised by the District at any time with a “reasonable transition period,” described as “no more than three to four weeks.” (DESE Guidance pg. 5). Given the inconsistent curriculum between the two plans, the Draft Plan clarifies that any such change would be “quite an adjustment for students, equivalent to switching schools and teachers midyear.” This disruptive adjustment would be further amplified for students who remain in the LMS Plan until it is safe to return to school on a full-time basis, as they would have an even longer period of learning based on a different curriculum than their peers. It would be far less of an adjustment if all-remote students were taught the same curriculum as all other students, by Bedford teachers, with consistent opportunities to see fellow students, staff, and educations online. It would also provide an easier adjustment for teachers, for they will ultimately fall responsible for the reintegration of these students.

One could imagine a situation where the School Committee—at some point, whether at the start of school or during the fall—elects to transition Bedford schools from an in-person or hybrid option to a full-remote option. Under the current guidance, students enrolled in the

LMS Plan will continue in the LMS Plan, even if the remainder of their peers attend a Bedford-run virtual program. Despite the challenges inherent in a switch between programs, which are touched upon above, we suspect that many families would see these obstacles as worth the eventual reintegration with their educators and peers, causing an exodus of students from the LMS Plan into the Bedford-run program. While this situation is not addressed in the Draft Plan, we raise this issue, because it warrants consideration, to highlight a very probable set of facts that could leave the District underprepared and ill-equipped to handle the influx of LMS Plan students into the District-run program. This potential undertaking, coupled at a time when schools would be in a state of transition, could prove to be an administrative nightmare—one that would be minimized if remote-only students are enrolled from the start in a District-run program.

We also wish to highlight—as you did in the Draft Plan—that the District’s focus has been on “providing the best teaching and learning opportunities for *ALL*,” and “equity as a core of our work as a district.” (Draft Plan pg. 5). Subjecting remote-only learners to a different and unequal curriculum fails to do exactly this. Importantly, the Draft Plan does not consider who may be most affected by the decision to offer unequal programming to remote-only students. While any parent can elect a remote-only option under the DESE Guidance and Draft Plan, the motives for their election may be illustrative. The signatories on this letter include parents with students with protected disabilities for whom COVID-19 could prove fatal; parents with students on IEPs and 504 plans for whom a robust curriculum is essential for progress; families with high-risk family members, siblings, or relatives; and families with a variety of exceptional reasons for wanting to keep the spread of COVID-19 to a minimum. The specific reason for one’s election is irrelevant to the availability of a remote option, yet it is important to note that the very students to whom you are offering an option with no Bedford teacher or peer interaction includes those for which a thorough and engaging remote curriculum may prove most important. Bedford has long been a community that prides itself on teaching all of our children equally—we have no fees for athletics, for buses, or for any student activities. To make Bedford teachers available for students who are well, but not for students who are sick or have high-risk family members, is contrary to well-established principles of this community.

There is another serious consequence of the remote-only option endorsed by the Draft Plan. This option is hugely dependent on family involvement to manage, supervise, and essentially teach our own children. Families without an available or capable adult in the household will be forced to send their children to in-person school, regardless of risk or individual circumstances. By providing an option of which “a critical component . . . would be to have parent supervision of children as they do their schoolwork,” (Draft Plan pg. 13) parents who are unable to provide a heightened level of constant engagement, especially in the lower grades, may be left without a true option to select remote learning.

Finally, we hope that a remote-only program run and staffed by the District would provide teachers for whom in-person instruction is impossible a viable option in which they could continue to teach a virtual classroom of engaged students in a combined synchronous and asynchronous manner, with a set schedule and increased accountability for students. Rather

than outsourcing the education of our children to an unknown outside provider, this could keep Bedford teachers safe, while providing our children with continued, exceptional instruction. Many families choose to settle in Bedford in large part due to the reputation and performance of its school system, and its teachers and support staff are an integral element of that system. Allowing high-risk teachers to ability to teach, and students the ability to benefit from their experience, is a community decision that we support.

We all want our kids to return to school in person, when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, during this period of unpredictability and instability, we respectfully request that you reconsider your decision to distinguish between two models of remote-learning and instead provide an equitable District-led and District-staffed remote option available to all students.

Respectfully,