

# Gardner Public Schools

Mark J. Pellegrino, *Superintendent*



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Dear Gardner Public Schools Community:

On March 13, 2020, the delivery of educational services radically changed for children throughout Massachusetts. Our staff worked diligently to provide the best educational program we could during this world-wide pandemic that wreaked havoc on every aspect of our society. Educators had to engage and teach students while learning new software programs, school systems, and processes that had to be adapted to remote learning. They did this while overcoming the countless obstacles faced by incorporating work and family life. I am proud of how our staff responded to this crisis, exemplifying care and professionalism at every turn.

Additionally, a great deal of pressure was put on our children and families. Although our schools provided remote learning services and supports, parents had to do more. At times, any parent may have to take on the role of teacher, counselor, cheerleader, or friend, when raising their children. However, during this time, they had to do this with greater frequency and a higher level of intensity, all while managing their own work and family. Ultimately, while everyone did their best, children lost out on a great deal, including hours of direct, in-person: classroom instruction; supports that help maintain physical and social/emotional health; services that strategically support struggling and at-risk learners; and the social aspect of being with their friends. Families had to organize an in-home academic schedule, ensure their children participated in remote learning, and provide extra help when they struggled. I cannot begin to describe the stress and burden that families shouldered during this difficult time. It once again shows that Gardner's community and schools pull together when facing a crisis.

Since that time, we have created a system to develop thoughtful plans to return to school. Our District Reopening Team, Health and Safety Team, and Social Emotional Team, work collaboratively and supportively with one another. They design district-wide practices, programs, protocols, and systems. Additionally, they are charged with advising our school-based teams, so the detailed school plans for students' return will be safe, supportive, and engaging. As the superintendent, I could not be prouder of the work that they have done. This system has allowed us to incorporate the varied perspectives of our diverse community. Putting our plans together would not have been possible without our dedicated staff who have given up so much of their own time. I would like to publicly thank them all for their hard work, passion, and demonstrative care for the children and community of Gardner.

No one would argue that it is imperative for students to return to our schools this fall. However, while our staff, students, and families have made it abundantly clear that they *want* to return to the classroom, we have chosen a Full Remote return to school in September. This is happening despite the low testing positivity rate of 0.49% in Gardner for the last two weeks, and a new metric put out this Tuesday by DESE recommending a full or hybrid return to school for districts like ours. We made this decision because, according to our surveys and many conversations with staff and community members, there are also concerns and fears that need to be addressed before some in our school community feel comfortable returning. The district has responded by purchasing over \$354,000 in personal protective equipment and hand sanitizer; increasing our cleaning protocols and sanitization equipment; creating new health and safety protocols; cleaning and repairing each univent (individual classroom HVAC systems that bring in fresh air); and redesigning almost all of our day-to-day operations to mitigate the risk of spreading this virus. Gardner Public Schools will be ready for students to return.

The fact is, we are dealing with a very new virus, that has relatively unknown long-term effects. Although our district measures are informed by the latest science and data relative to the spread of this terrible virus, they fall short of relieving many families of their fears. In order to address these fears and concerns, the district must foster

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a sense of trust that we will keep our schools safe. So, we will proceed slowly, methodically, and take small steps as students and staff return. We will be overly cautious, overly safe. However, we all know that being safe means having low risk, not “no risk.” Please know that we will take the necessary steps to minimize any risk of transmission of COVID-19 as our schools reopen. We will make sure that the return to Gardner Public Schools is a safe one.

Sincerely,

Mark J. Pellegrino, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of Schools

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