

September 2020

Dear Parents, Guardians, and Caregivers,

Welcome to the start of the 2020-21 school-year! It goes without saying this is a highly unusual start to the year with many questions, uncertainty and much ambiguity. While very challenging, our charge however, remains the same – to provide your child with a high-quality, inclusive education that results in college, career and community readiness. In partnership with your child's education, I wish to share some important updates and resources.

**Department Mission:** Student Services staff provide the necessary resources and supports to assist schools in increasing student access to high quality instruction, especially those experiencing barriers to success in areas such as attendance, achievement, behavior, physical health, mental health, and basic needs. By promoting wellness for the whole child, this department contributes to the district vision of preparing all children to be college, career and community ready upon graduation.

**The Department of Student Services has three overarching areas of responsibility:**

1. Providing supports/services/instruction to all students in the areas of physical/mental/behavioral health.
2. Providing specialized services and supports such that students with disabilities are appropriately identified and receive a free appropriate public education through special education/related services and/or §504 accommodations resulting in meaningful benefit.
3. Provide state and federal resources to remove educational barriers and equitably support students, staff and families.

I'm including a link to our Department of [Student Services directory](#) so that you know who does what and when questions or concerns arise, you have the most up to date contact information. Should you have questions or concerns, I encourage you to first contact your child's special education teacher as typically they are the most knowledgeable about program and services details. If for some reason the special education teacher cannot address your questions or concerns, I encourage you to next contact the building program support teacher (PST) and/or school principal. Further, there may be times when a district office-based administrator (assistant director or myself) are needed to address particularly complex or sensitive matters.

**Important Updates for the 2020-21 School Year:**

**In-Person Instruction for the Start of the 2020-21 School-year.** Public Health Madison & Dane Co. (PHMDC) recently released an [amendment to Order #9](#) and [frequently asked questions](#) (FAQ's) document, which allows for limited in-person instruction for students in any grade with a disability and/or an Individualized Education Program (IEP) who, due to their unique needs, require in-person instruction to benefit from their program. With the District starting the 2020-21 school year virtually, the vast majority of students with disabilities will be receiving their special education/related services virtually or through distance learning practices. Students whose programs we cannot implement or are highly ineffective virtually, will receive in-person instruction. The determination for in-person instruction will be made by the student's IEP team. For in-person services, these are the [General Health and Safety Guidance](#) staff will be using.

**Additional Services.** Despite our best efforts to allow for continuity of learning during the extended school closure period, some special education, related services, and supplementary aids and supports could not be

provided or were not as effective virtually. In some cases, students may have experienced regression of skills and/or negatively impacted the student's ability to make progress towards IEP goals or applicable standards. As a result, some students will require additional services to mitigate the impact of the school closure. As we begin the new school year, staff are just beginning the first phase of assessing student levels to understand the impact of the closure. This data will inform IEP teams as they consider the need for additional services. Our expectation is to complete all IEP meetings where additional services are discussed during first semester. Any additional services will be provided through the school year to end of summer, 2021.

**Special Education Program Evaluation.** In January, 2020, we began an independent evaluation of our special education programs and services conducted by WestEd. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the implementation of our [Special Education Plan](#), determine the efficacy of our programs/services and formulate recommendations for improvement. While the extended school closure delayed numerous aspects of the evaluation, we continue to make progress and are on track to complete it during the spring of 2021. The recommendations from the program evaluation will be used to create a new Special Education Plan for the next five years.

**Post Individualized Education Program (IEP) Meeting Parent Survey.** We are committed to improving the outcomes of students with disabilities, I will be sending you a revised survey following your son/daughter's IEP meeting. The results are taken seriously and are used to improve our systems, procedures, and processes at the district and school level. Your feedback and perspective is very much appreciated, please take a few minutes to complete this important survey. To see the results of the 2019-20 survey, please click [here](#).

**Electronic IEP System.** For the past 18 months, the district has been creating a new electronic IEP system. We had intended to introduce the new system for the 2020-21 school-year however, given the circumstances and tremendous amount of changes/new learning, we are delaying implementation. We want to reduce as many distractions as possible to ensure staff are focused on matters of teaching and learning.

**[Parent Portal - View IEPs](#).** If you are interested in receiving electronic IEP documents, please let your child's special education teacher know. Because we are committed to maintaining strict confidentiality regarding special education/student records, this option will be both voluntary and require you to provide the email address where records will be sent.

**Special Education Advisory Council.** Please be aware that we have an advisory council comprised of parents/guardians and community agency representatives. The purpose of the Council is four-fold:

- Increase the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in district policy making and decision making.
- Advise the District on policy and decisions affecting and/or related to special education while increasing the outcomes of students with disabilities.
- Recommend priorities to be addressed by the District in their annual and long-term Strategic Framework.
- Support the needs of students with disabilities regarding funding and resource allocation.

Last school year the Advisory worked closely with me to address three key areas impacting the outcomes of students with disabilities: (1) accountability, (2) hiring, retention, supervision and evaluation of staff and (3) professional development. If you are interested in being part of the Council, please contact me directly at: [jeharper@madison.k12.wi.us](mailto:jeharper@madison.k12.wi.us)

**Consent to Bill Wisconsin Medicaid for Health-Related Special Education & Related Services.**

Wisconsin Medicaid reimburses school districts for providing medical services to students who receive special education. Medicaid services at school can include occupational, physical and speech therapy, counseling, nursing, psychological and social work services. These medically related special education services can be paid for from Medicaid funding which greatly aids the district in maintaining staff.

Since MMSD does not know which children with disabilities do or do not have Medicaid, MMSD is requesting that everyone sign a consent so that we can bill Medicaid and we know who has received this information. Throughout the school year, if we do not have a consent form on file, MMSD staff will be contacting parents/legal guardians. For more information go to the [MMSD Wisconsin Medicaid webpage](#).

Finally, I am including links to several important resources which you may find helpful regarding parent/student rights, legal concepts, procedures, background information:

- Parent Rights Brochure – [English](#) – [Spanish](#) – [Hmong](#)
- Special Education in Plain Language: A User Friendly Handbook on Special Education Laws, Policies and Practices in Wisconsin. [English Print Version](#) - [En Espanol](#)
- [Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities website](#)
- [Madison Metropolitan School District Parent Planner](#)
- [Student Services website](#)
- [DPI COVID-19 webpage](#)
- [COVID-19 Special Education Question and Answer Document](#)

While acknowledging the many challenges we're all facing at this time, your child's academic and social-emotional wellbeing continue to be our highest priority. We remain steadfast in our commitment to providing your child with an excellent education irrespective of the circumstances. Please do not hesitate to reach out to your child's casemanager or member of our [administrative team](#) if there is any way that we can provide additional support to you or your child.

Sincerely,

*John Harper*

John Harper, PhD  
Executive Director of Student Services