

Roxbury Township Public Schools

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Dear Parents/Guardians:

This month I want to share with you information about three topics. First, it is important for you to be updated on the fact that the Board has now passed a change in our delayed opening policy. Delayed openings of schools and offices will be two-hours rather than the 90-minute delay previously in place. Therefore, a school that starts at 7:25 will now, on delayed opening days, start at 9:25, 8:15 will start at 10:15, and so on. This also applies to the anticipated arrival of your bus. Buses will arrive to pick your child up two hours later than normal. Naturally on inclement weather days, this timeframe may vary more than on regular days.

It is our hope that this time schedule change will have several positive effects. One, it simply will be easier for you and your children to remember the time to catch the bus and the time that school starts. Secondly, we anticipate that it will give both our own staff more time to clear the parking lots and driveways in each of the seven schools and will also give the Township Public Works and Roads Department a greater opportunity to have the roads cleared after a snow or ice storm. Lastly, we also believe that this should help us reduce the number of days that we have to close school. We believe school closings will be limited to those days when there are more severe storms that make it impossible to have roads and schools ready in a timely manner.

Typically the call that schools are closed or that there will be a delayed opening goes out at 5:30 in the morning. This is to accommodate buses that pick up students who go to the high school for an early start and also is helpful to the staff members who are traveling a distance to get to school. If, after a delayed opening has been announced, we find it necessary to close school, I anticipate that notice will go out no later than 7 AM. I also want to advise you that periodically we may call a delayed opening the night before when the weather is threatening or when we are uncertain how long it will take us to get parking lots cleared. Again, an official notice that the schools may be closed will come by 7 AM; otherwise, it is likely that school will proceed on the delayed opening basis.

It is important for parents to remember that when we have inclement weather and severe storms, it may be extremely difficult and sometimes impossible for buses to get to every stop that they do on a regular day. It may be necessary for students to walk a greater distance to catch a bus or it may be necessary for students to walk a greater distance when they get off a bus after school.

The district must make our judgment based on what is reasonable for the great majority of our 4000 students. It is important that you are aware we recognize your right as a parent to make your own judgment about the safety of travel for your own child. Naturally, we discourage any regular absenteeism from school but recognize that on days we have snow or ice, parents may make a decision for their own family based on the location of your home or the conditions in your neighborhood. Please understand that while we recognize your right to make a decision that it best for your family, we cannot make a judgment about closing the schools based on the most difficult streets to access in Roxbury Township. **(PLEASE SEE POSTING WITH DETAILS ABOUT DELAYED OPENINGS ON THE WEBSITE)**

About 200 members of our school community took advantage of the opportunity to see the film *Race to No Where*. The film sparked a healthy discussion about the many signs of stress which students are experiencing. Many aspects of the film are as relevant in Roxbury as they are in communities around the nation. It is also relevant in light of the ongoing discussions we have been having about the grading system which moved to 5th grade this year. How does a teacher or a parent balance the pressure a student feels as the result of a C or D versus the concerns some parents have expressed about the perceived ambiguity of Meets Expectations? This is a very healthy discussion for parents and educators to have among themselves and with each other. One of the underlying themes in the *Race to No Where* film is the stress that students feel to succeed. Some of the stress is internally imposed on themselves, some because they want to please their parents, some is imposed by parents, and clearly some is imposed by schools. External forces are at work as well. We live in a society characterized by competition at all levels. There is competition and pressure for students to excel at all levels from elementary through high school then on to college and the workplace. The film reveals that many more students than we might have assumed do not deal with stress well. Activities that are well intended and valuable may result in the unintended consequence of stress from multiple sources.

American educators have often justified the assignment of homework as a way of making up for the fact that U.S. school children have shorter school days, shorter school weeks, and a shorter school year than most European and Asian nations. Homework is intended, in many cases, to be an extension of the school day. It should be a time when students are engaged in worthwhile academic endeavors. Studies, however, often indicate that criticism directed at homework is valid. Some studies have found that homework is not meaningful, interesting, or even challenging and furthermore may take an excessive amount of time. If homework is used as a tool to extend the school day and to enhance learning, we need to confirm it is time well spent. Is homework meaningful? Is it creative, thought provoking? Is there a way to measure that homework has had a positive impact on student performance? It is critical that time spent beyond the school day leads to deeper understanding and does not diminish student enthusiasm for learning. One student in the film who had always done well academically received a failing grade in math which precipitated serious depression. If you review some of the discussions that you have had with your friends and neighbors about the grading system, I think it's fair to ask yourself whether A,B,C grades lessen or heighten the stress that students feel versus a grade such as M, indicating meets expectations. The fact is there is no perfect grading system. The fact that people are discussing this topic, especially if they are willing to listen to both sides, is very healthy. Too often the discussions that we have surrounding education are about extracurricular activities and the cost of educating students in New Jersey in the year 2011 rather than focusing

on the demands of a 21st century. I welcome an open dialog on this topic and I believe that we will all learn from each other as we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of any particular grading system. In the meantime, we are committed to the current grading system for the 2011/2012 school year and we are also eager to find metrics that will help us determine if the current system has been successful and whether or not we should move forward with the current system in subsequent years. Therefore, your input is greatly appreciated.*

In closing, I want to suggest that one of the most dangerous things that we can do in the 21st century is to want education in today's classrooms to look like it did in the 20th century. The world is changing at an increasingly rapid pace; the way we teach has to be dramatically different from the way we used to teach; the content of the courses – that goal of more skills and less concern about content – also has to be different. It is almost meaningless for students to learn or memorize disconnected facts that don't lead them to a deeper understanding of a historical event, a mathematical formula, a scientific rule, or the correct construction of a sentence. All of these things are important but all of these things can be learned as needed and are readily accessible. The goal is to create inquiring minds and students who can demonstrate skills that will serve them well as they go through public schools, then on to college, and then on to the work place. Recent reports indicate that students in school today will often be in as many as fourteen (14) different jobs by the time they're 38 years old. That's a dramatically different dynamic than most of us ever thought about, never mind lived with. Consequently, I remind parents, as I frequently do in small group meetings, that you should never be concerned if learning in today's classroom looks different than when you went to school; you should only be concerned if it looks the same.

Sincerely,

James O'Neill
Interim Superintendent of Schools

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* In an effort to further explain the K-5 grading system, Assistant Superintendent Dr. James Heinegg will conduct a workshop Thursday evening October 20th at 7 PM in the Lincoln/Roosevelt auditorium. All parents are encouraged to attend especially if you have concerns about the grading program and the implications the grades have for your child. I am sure you will find the information that he shares extremely helpful. I am also optimistic that the presentation may help you and maybe it will help you view the grading system differently.