

July 24, 2020

ascendlearning.org

Dear Ascend Families,

We hope you are enjoying a safe and happy summer. Thank you for responding to the family survey we launched last month. Your responses have been compiled and we've used the results to inform our planning for the 2020-21 academic year. More than 3,900 surveys were completed, representing more than 70% of our students. Here's a brief summary of what Ascend families told us:

- **Increased parent workload** (44%), **loss of wages** (33%), and **emotional challenges** (26%) are the largest effects of the pandemic for our families, while 18% have lost a loved one and 9% have experienced illness.
- **44% of families want their child to have a blend of both in-person and remote learning experiences**, while 37% of parents want their child to attend in-person every day and 19% want to continue full-time remote learning
- **66% of families support an earlier dismissal time in our lower and middle schools.**
- **48%** of families indicate they are able to support their children with technology and instruction for **three or more hours per day** during remote learning, while 46% of parents are able to support for one to two hours, and 6% are not able to support remote learning at all.
- **35%** of parents found supporting their child with remote learning **easy**, but another **35%** found it to be **difficult**, and the remaining **30%** were somewhere **in between**.
- **89% of families have reliable internet service.**

While the data generally shows a diverse mix of opinions, it's important to note that this survey was launched at the end of June, and we know that attitudes and circumstances may have shifted over the last several weeks as new information has emerged about how the virus is impacting the country and how other school systems are planning to begin the new school year.

We are currently in the process of reviewing and responding to the reopening guidance issued by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) late last week which includes detailed criteria that all schools must meet or exceed to begin the 2020-21 academic year, including requirements related to both in-person and remote learning. We are also surveying our staff to better understand the impacts the pandemic has had on them and their families and to gauge their ability to return to in-person learning.

We know your family is eager to learn what school will look like for your children this fall so you can start making plans for your entire family. Our goal is to use your input in conjunction with input from our staff and in compliance with requirements from the state, along with leveraging best practices from schools and health experts across the globe, to implement a return to school plan that prioritizes health and safety while still maximizing academic achievement. Here is what has already been decided about how we'll return to school:

- We believe that every child needs to have access to a dedicated laptop this year in order to close the gap as much as possible between in-person and remote instruction. For this reason, we have already purchased a laptop for every student. We aim to have these ready before the start of school.
- When we do return to school in-person, we will not be able to bring every student back for in-person instruction every day. We plan to prioritize in-person instruction for our very youngest students and our students who are most at-risk of falling behind.
- Every parent will have the option to elect remote instruction for their child during the first quarter of the year at minimum.
- When we are in-person for learning, we will adhere to all safety guidelines expressed by New York State (including temperature screenings, face coverings, reduced building capacity and more).

Our governor has also informed all schools that we must anticipate significant budget reductions in light of the financial impact of the pandemic. Though we do not yet know for certain how significant that budget cut will be, this summer we worked with our boards and our school directors to plan for those reductions and reduce costs. As a result, we restructured our staffing model at the schools and network office with an eye toward keeping our dollars as close to the classrooms as possible and preserving as many teaching positions and other student support positions as possible. The greatest impact was to the size of our school's leadership teams--they are now smaller, with re-envisioned roles and responsibilities. This was incredibly challenging for us all as we had to say goodbye to

many valued staff members at the end of July. However, we decided to implement these changes now to minimize additional disruptions and negative impacts to students during the course of the school year. We believe that teacher and staff retention is incredibly important because of the positive impact sustained relationships have on the community and student outcomes.

While our return to school plan is not yet complete, we would like to share our progress with you and ask you to share your feedback. To facilitate this, you are invited to attend one of three town hall meetings on July 31, where we'll share a brief update about recent developments and how we plan to begin the new academic year, and will solicit your thoughts, comments, and any concerns that you may have about sending your children to school this fall.

Although you may attend whichever session best suits your schedule, we encourage parents to join a meeting that matches the grade level of your child:

| Grade band | Meeting date and time | RingCentral (Zoom) link |
|---|-----------------------|--|
| Lower schools (grades K-4) All families welcome | July 31, 9:30-11:00am | Join from PC, Mac, Linux, iOS or Android: https://meetings.ringcentral.com/j/1485579076 Or Telephone: (646)-357-3664 Meeting ID: 148 557 9076 |
| Upper schools (grades 5-12) All families welcome | July 31, 1:30-3:00pm | Join from PC, Mac, Linux, iOS or Android: https://meetings.ringcentral.com/j/1488449455 Or Telephone: (646)-357-3664 Meeting ID: 148 844 9455 |
| All grades (grades K-12) All families welcome | July 31, 5:00-6:30pm | Join from PC, Mac, Linux, iOS or Android: https://meetings.ringcentral.com/j/1488706776 Or Telephone: (646)-357-3664 Meeting ID: 148 870 6776 |

Parents with children across multiple school levels may choose whichever session is most convenient for them. To join, you may dial in by phone or use the link to log into the call online.

Your perspective is critical to how we move forward this fall. As such, rather than host an informal question and answer session, we want to make space for as many parent voices as possible to share your perspective. To that end, we will have a public comment period during the meeting. Anyone who would like to share feedback or input on the reopening plan will have the opportunity at the start of the meeting to sign-up to do so. Each person who offers comment will be able to speak for up to 2 minutes; we will welcome as many comments as possible by the meeting's end time. Should we run out of time during the meeting, additional comment on our reopening plans can be sent to: townhall@ascendlearning.org.

Following our parent and staff meetings, we will again be in touch with everyone in our community about our reopening plans on or before August 7; we will also be sharing our plan on our websites by that date.

Thank you again for supporting your student, your school, and your community during this time of ambiguity. Please continue to stay safe and healthy!

Regards,



Brandon Sorlie
Chief Schools Officer