



To: Seekonk School Committee
From: Dr. Rich Drolet, Superintendent of Schools
Date: January 25, 2021
Re: Superintendent's Update

M.A.S.S. Superintendent's Award for Excellence

I am pleased to announce that SHS senior Madison Sirois was awarded a \$1,000 scholarship sponsored by the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (M.A.S.S.) and member districts from the South Coast Educational Collaborative. The virtual award ceremony was held on January 21st. Madison, her mother Amy, Dr. Whalen, and myself attended. Madison is a quiet and humble leader who is currently ranked first in the class of 2021. She is extremely friendly and as a result, is well-liked by her peers. Madison contributes her ideas to the high school and actively participates in "Student Lobby Hour" discussions with administrators, students and staff. A finalist for the \$20,000 Coca-Cola 20 scholarship, Madison puts her leadership skills to good use as an Executive Board member of the National Honor Society. She continues to challenge herself academically by participating as a member of the Model UN Team. Along with her strong commitment to challenging academic coursework, Madison has devoted much of her time to meaningful, longstanding extracurricular pursuits. She is a member of the Seekonk High swim team and she plays softball for both Seekonk High as well as an independent league. Madison is a three-year member of the high school's Key Club, a Spanish Club member, and a Green Team member. What may be considered most notable by some is Madison's role as high school Yearbook Editor, a position she has held for the past three years which is typically a role filled each year by a member of the senior class. Congratulations to Madison on this well-deserved acknowledgment of distinction! This [Press Release](#) we shared last week also explains the award and outlines Madison's accomplishments.

Tiered Focused Monitoring

Every three years all school districts in Massachusetts participate in a process called Tiered Focused Monitoring (TFM) through the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Office of Public School Monitoring. This process is designed to monitor the implementation of special education and civil rights requirements to support improved and sustained outcomes for students. Areas of review related to special education

include student assessments, determination of eligibility, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team process, and IEP development and implementation. Areas of review related to civil rights include bullying, student discipline, physical restraint, and equal access to school programs for all students. Tiered Focused Monitoring for Seekonk Public Schools will occur the week of February 8th. All meetings and interviews will be conducted remotely. For any monitoring that may need to occur onsite, DESE will strictly adhere to the latest public health guidance. Click here for the [Press Release](#) we sent out on Thursday, Jan. 7th.

Fall Town Meeting

As you know the Fall Town Meeting has again been postponed to Wednesday, February 3rd, in our Seekonk High School auditorium at 7 PM. At the Fall Town Meeting I will give a brief [presentation](#) to advocate for our Seekonk town residents to support the construction of our 18-22 year-old “Transitions” Program at Seekonk High School. We have been told it is very likely that the Fall Town Meeting will again be postponed to March due to the pandemic.

Superintendent’s Mid-Winter Meeting

On January 21st I attended (virtually) the annual mid-winter superintendent’s professional development session. The session was about bringing emotional intelligence, also known as “EQ,” from theory to practice as it relates to meeting the challenges of today as a superintendent and as an educator in general. Marc Brackett was the keynote speaker and he spoke about the wisdom of harnessing emotions to enhance decision making, leadership skills, well-being, workplace creativity, and organizational performance during stressful times. Marc spoke about his experience with the emotional intelligence framework developed at Yale, which includes key skills that have been shown to help people achieve greater personal and professional success. I will be sharing what I learned with the district leadership team as well as all staff in the future.

Pool Testing Initiative

For the past two weeks we were in the process of exploring DESE-sponsored COVID-19 pool testing in our Seekonk Public Schools. If we decided to join, DESE would have sponsored and paid for the first six weeks of testing, and then we would have been on our own to fund and support the pool testing initiative after that. Pool testing would have been for everyone weekly (run twice a week, once with each cohort) for any students or staff, who would need to consent to this PCR pool test in writing. They would combine 20-25 swabs together and do 1 PCR test for that batch. The test results are supposed to come back 24-48 hours later. This pool testing is primarily for students Grades 2-12 and could also be for staff. For our older students it would need to be self-administered in the classroom (with 6-feet of distancing), which would most likely have to be facilitated by teachers, and then individual rapid testing

followed-up by another PCR test would have to be administered for all students and all staff in any pool that tested positive (they would have to quarantine/not come to school in the meantime, and then regardless of the rapid test results also get the more reliable PCR test). This pool testing is only for districts in hybrid or full in-person learning (not for full remote districts). Supports may be offered if we couldn't do everything internally (technical support, sending tests out, administering tests) for the first 6 weeks, and then we would have to pay for the testing and support (we estimate this would cost about 10K-20K a week) on our own. Our four school nurses, Mr. Waddicor, Mrs. Doe and I have been meeting weekly with our Seekonk Board of Health Agent, Brian Darling, and our CTC (Community Tracing Collaborative) representative for Seekonk, Amrith Fernandes Prabhu.

In the end, with feedback from our school nurses and having attended numerous meetings about this DESE-sponsored pool testing initiative, we still have more concerns and questions than we have answers or anticipated benefits of pool testing, and we have decided not to pursue the pool testing initiative at this time due to the many logistical issues associated with it such as testing protocols and agreements and assurances needed, training, lack of staff/manpower to administer the testing and recording, high anticipated costs, and complications with repeatedly having to do follow-up Binax Now rapid testing as well as follow-up PCR retesting for all individuals in any pool who may be positive.

MCAS and ACCESS Testing Update

DESE has provided districts with updated information regarding MCAS testing for the 2020-2021 school year. Below is a summary of those updates:

- *High School Graduation Requirements*: In order to graduate, students have historically been required to earn a passing score on the MCAS tests in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and one of the Science and Technology/Engineering tests (biology, chemistry, introductory physics, and technology/engineering). Many students in the SHS class of 2021 have already met these graduate requirements; however, due to the cancellation of last year's MCAS test, some students have not. DESE has modified the competency determination for the class of 2021. The modification would allow students to still graduate by passing an approved course and demonstrating competency in that subject area instead of passing the MCAS test. Approximately 5 students are in need of the modified competency determination.
- *MCAS Testing for Grades 3-8*: All students in grades 3-8 will participate in a shortened version of the MCAS in English language arts and mathematics. Students in grades 5 and 8 will also take a shortened version of the science and technology/engineering MCAS. Testing this year will include a broad range of questions that will help districts identify learning gaps that have occurred in each grade level and in the content areas being tested. We will then use this data to determine the curricular adjustments that will be needed once the new school year begins. These testing windows will begin in early

April and will close in late May. Schools will be sending out specific testing dates in the near future.

- *ACCESS Testing for English Learners:* The ACCESS is given to English learners to help strengthen educational programs for our ELs. In prior years, the window for completing ACCESS testing would have been in February. The window for 2021 will close on May 20, 2021.

LEARNING PLAN UPDATE

Structured Learning Time for Hybrid Learning Models Update

As I mentioned at the last December 21st School Committee Meeting, as of January 19th DESE is mandating 35 hours of in-person or synchronous instruction over a two-week period as part of [district hybrid models](#), or 40 hours of synchronous instruction over a two-week span for [districts that are fully remote](#). I want to give the SEA and the teachers a lot of credit for coming to the table with us proactively in late December and also in early January so we could improve our remote learning schedules in time for the week of January 4th's fully remote week, and also for now adding live-streaming for all of our students on their off-hybrid days when they are learning at home. There was a lot of collaboration and sharing of best practices last week, which we know will continue. We are now in full compliance with this new unfunded DESE mandate.

Weekly Color-Coded Massachusetts Department of Health Metrics Update

The chart below shares Seekonk's most recent data from four weeks in November, five weeks in December, and the first three weeks in January. These past 12 weeks have fallen under the newer weekly color-coded Massachusetts DPH metrics, which were released on November 6, 2020.

Date	Seekonk Case Count (last 14 days)	Average Daily Incidence Rate Per 100,000 (last 14 days)	State of Massachusetts % Positivity Rate	Seekonk's % Positivity Rate (last 14 days)
November 5	56	28.5	1.84%	5.56%
November 12	61	31.1	2.29%	6.11%
November 19	67	34.2	3.05%	7.08%
November 27	81	41.3	3.32%	7.52%
December 3	116	59.1	3.73%	11.82%

December 10	155	79.0	5.25%	15.85%
December 17	165	84.1	6.01%	13.94%
December 24	114	58.1	6.14%	10.25%
December 31	106	54.0	6.51%	11.24%
January 7	124	63.2	7.71%	13.47%
January 14	150	76.5	7.99%	13.68%
January 21	109	55.6	6.85%	9.47%

As I have shared in my past three superintendent’s updates, these updated metrics for communities are supposed to give school districts more data to make informed decisions regarding prioritizing more *in-person* learning. DESE and Commissioner Riley have released repeated guidance to superintendents saying “districts and schools are encouraged to remain open even if their community is designated as **red**, so long as there is no evidence of COVID-19 transmission in the schools.” Studies have shown that there is low transmission in schools, even in communities where there are high rates of COVID such as Seekonk. To our knowledge and through our contact tracing, all of the positive cases have still been from transmissions outside of our schools.

Here is the data below for the total number of cases reported in our schools (as of Jan. 25th at 1 PM):

- Aitken Elementary School: 4 staff, 18 students
- Martin Elementary School: 7 staff, 10 students
- Hurley Middle School: 6 staff, 14 students
- Seekonk High School: 9 staff, 44 students

In total we have encountered 112 positive cases, 30 of which have been reported in the past two weeks since we returned to school after the winter break on Jan. 11th. Here is a [link](#) to our COVID Dashboard updated daily on our website.

Overall, Seekonk’s weekly data is significantly “lower” than the last time we met on December 21st. In the “Average Daily Incidence Rate per 100,000” (residents) in the state of Massachusetts, Seekonk was at **84.1** on Dec. 17th and we are now at **55.6**. And Seekonk’s high “Percent Positivity” rate of **13.94%** on Dec. 17th is now at **9.47%**, which is the lowest it’s been since the end of November.

After February break on Tuesday, February 23rd we will be bringing back ALL K-2 students for in-person learning 4 days a week (Mondays will still be district-wide remote learning days). Also, the following week on March 2nd we will bring back all Grade 6

students at HMS and all Grade 9 students at SHS for in-person learning four days a week (again, Mondays will still be district-wide remote days).

It will be difficult to bring back more students full-time outside of Grades K-2, Grade 6, and Grade 9 due to current busing limitations, needing to keep *at least* 3-feet of distance between students at all times (DESE mandate), and with lunch guidelines (no masks, 6-feet of distance needed). We are able to bring back Grades K-2 sooner due to lower class sizes in these grades. Bringing back additional students safely also requires us to move additional furniture to create more classroom spaces, eating areas, and deal with some other logistics. We would love at this time to be able to announce a plan to bring back more students full-time in Grades 3-5 and also Grades 7-8 and Grades 10-12, but that is not currently feasible. We remain committed to communicating with our families to provide new information as soon as it becomes available. We will continue to be transparent in our decision making.

We are now advocating, planning, and looking forward to getting our teachers and staff vaccinated. [Here](#) is a letter from M.A.S.S. (state superintendent's association) to the governor regarding the importance of getting our teachers and staff vaccinated as soon as possible.

Please remember to keep in mind as we encounter new positive COVID cases, more students or classes may be required to quarantine and temporarily return to full remote learning for 1-2 weeks. Additionally, the possibility remains that a grade level or school may need to shift to full remote learning for 1-2 weeks if we encounter too many close contacts or we are understaffed. We will continue to meet weekly with Seekonk's Board of Health Agent and CTC representative in order to cross-reference any positive cases as well as confirm close contacts associated with our outside-of-school as well as in-school confirmed positive cases.

I would like to continue to acknowledge and thank our teachers and staff, parents and families, School Committee, and our district leadership team for their flexibility, hard work, patience, resilience, and fortitude. We are doing everything we can do to bring more students back to school in a safe manner while still meeting state safety guidelines and protocols.