



SUFFOLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Dr. John B. Gordon III, Superintendent

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September 17, 2020

Dear SPS Family:

First, I would like to thank all of our students, teachers, parents, and others who have supported Suffolk Public Schools during our new normal and the virtual start to the 2020-2021 school year. We are now eight days in, and we continue to find innovative and creative ways to educate our students.

In October of 2019, when I started as your new superintendent, we promised transparency, courage, and a vision for making Suffolk Public Schools the nation's premier school division. We have taken several steps to make that vision a reality. We must continue to persevere regardless of the challenges that we face. I also discussed the courage to make adjustments to plans if the data showed that an adjustment was necessary. This is why we are currently reviewing options with the "Big Blue Button" app in Canvas. We have received a variety of feedback from both staff and parents on both the positives and negatives of using the "Big Blue Button."

I want to be clear in describing the "Big Blue Button" as an application and not Canvas's main feature. Canvas is our learning management system that houses all of our instructional information. It serves as the Virtual Classroom for our students. The "Big Blue Button" is the visual broadcasting component that allows our teachers to share content, participate in conferences, and provide other interactions between teachers and students. Last week, we discovered that there have been issues with sharing content and having both staff and students log into conferences at several school locations. Our Teaching and Learning and Technology Departments have worked diligently to identify the source of these issues. We have provided temporary solutions to staff on Friday, September 11, 2020. As we work towards a permanent solution, our focus is to have minimal impact from the student and parent perspective.

We have informed staff that if they are not having issues with the "Big Blue Button," then they may continue to use it as intended. We have suggested using Google Meet and the standard version of Zoom until we finish testing our permanent solution for those having issues. A pro of using Google Meet or Zoom is the overall familiarity the staff already has with both products. A con is that neither platform allows our teachers to record instruction like we have in the "Big Blue Button" option. Testing our permanent solution will take a few more days. We ask for your patience as we want to ensure that online security, usability, and a minimal impact on the student view stays at the forefront.

We have also received numerous inquiries on the potential for primary age students (those in grades PreK-3)

returning to school due to their need for face to face instruction and social interaction. We discuss this option daily at the Senior Leadership Level, and we are exploring all options. I want to share that our primary focus is on the safety of staff and students. One of the chief mitigation strategies from the Center for Disease Control and the Virginia Department of Health is limiting the total number of people in an area. Currently, the city of Suffolk has seen a spike in the total number of Covid-19 cases and overall positivity rate. Suffolk is currently in the "red," which means that the recommendation would be not to return to a Hybrid instructional model. We will continue to monitor our health data weekly. We will also provide our school board with an update at the October 8, 2020 school board meeting.

Thank you to all of you who have communicated the positive experiences that have occurred at the start of the 2020-2021 school year. We knew that there would be challenges, but we appreciate the overall positivity we have seen on our social media pages and direct communication with staff. We also understand the concerns that many of you have expressed regarding the need for improved broadband and internet access in the more rural parts of the city. I can assure you that I am in constant communication with our City Government, and they fully understand the need to improve internet access in our beloved city. For those families experiencing broadband issues, I strongly encourage you to visit our Resource Access Centers at Pioneer Elementary School, Elephant's Fork Elementary School, and Oakland Elementary School. Our Resource Access Centers are open Monday-Thursday from 8:30 A.M.-11:30 A.M. and 4 P.M.-6 P.M. We have also provided wireless access points for exterior wi-fi in the parking lots of Pioneer Elementary School, Lakeland High School, and the Whaleyville Community Center. The wireless access points are available seven days a week for twenty-four hours a day.

We will partner with each other and stay together during Educate and Innovate and our virtual learning model. Our students and staff are resilient, and I know that everyone is working together to support our students. Thank you for being a strong supporter of Suffolk Public Schools.

Take care and be safe!

Sincerely,



Dr. John B. Gordon III
Division Superintendent