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Assistant Superintendent for Student Services

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Greetings to Newton Families,

I hope this communication finds you doing well.

Allow me to start by expressing my sincere gratitude and appreciation for your newfound obligations as an educator for your child. I can relate as I am home alone each day with my three year old granddaughter as she must be away from her first responder parents for her own medical safety. Supporting her through this difficult separation, trying to care for and educate her as well as complete my job functions is a daunting endeavor. I can only imagine how difficult it is for all of you.

We appreciate your feedback provided through the family survey and have worked to incorporate it into our distance learning plan. As we enter this phase of distance learning that will take us through until the end of the year, I wanted to update you on our special education services. Below you will find information on service plans, the role of aides and behavior therapists, virtual IEP meetings, planning for summer/fall, and a unique educational opportunity.

Service Plan Goals

Specific to special education, I have communicated to faculty our priority is to provide as much specialized instruction to our students as is feasible in light of these circumstances. The weekly service plans are designed to be a vehicle to coordinate specialized instruction and related services for your child. These services are focused on IEP goals and objectives.

Role of Aides and Behavior Therapists

Many of you have inquired about the role of our aides and behavior therapists (BTs) during distance learning. Currently, aides and BTs are providing important support such as accompanying teachers in small group sessions, coordinating communications and creating daily schedules to aid executive functioning and reduce the burden on families. These are important personnel, who provide a valuable service to students in face to face instructional situations.

We also know that these valuable employees are helpful because they receive a considerable amount of support, direction and supervision during a typical school day in order to ensure their success. We are training aides and BTs to be ready to provide specialized instruction and it takes time, starting with STRIDE. In the coming weeks, we will move to other citywide programs and inclusive settings as we

assess the readiness of our aides and BTs. Any questions about specialized instruction can be answered by the special education leadership in your child's school building.

IEP Meetings and Evaluations

Related to the decision to prioritize specialized instruction is the matter of IEP meetings and evaluations. Our special education leaders (team specialists, assistant principals, department heads, and program leaders) are working to initiate a virtual IEP meeting procedure while continuing to emphasize instruction as a priority. Initial and re-evaluation decisions will be navigated individually and collaboratively with families with an emphasis on something that unites us - decisions that best serve sound educational decisions for the student. The more families and staff are able to work collaboratively in scheduling and holding these meetings, the better served our students will be.

Planning for Summer and Fall

We are also deep in the process of planning for summer and fall, while awaiting guidance from DESE and Governor Baker. We do know that such planning is complex and takes considerable time and thought. In light of this, I want you to know that we have multiple contingency plans so we can act swiftly once guidance comes. We are planning for multiple variations of both in person and distance ESY services, or a combination thereof. We hope in our hearts that we can all be together in person but maintaining the health and safety of our students, staff, families, and community members is always our top priority. The same rings true for the fall, although that is further in the future and much harder to predict. As you heard from Superintendent Fleishman, the district has many teams working on the many components of school in the fall.

I understand uncertainty is difficult and it can conjure anxious feelings. I can completely relate and would be more comfortable with firm decisions on which we could take decisive action. We are forced to find ways to consider multiple alternatives and help ourselves remain calm. We are all in this together and I value our partnership. No longer are school personnel and families merely co-team members, we are now colleagues partnering to educate our children.

Support Opportunity for Parents/Guardians

Finally, I am pleased to partner with SEPAC to offer two identical webinars/talks from Dr. Xenia Johnson Bhembe on Thursday May 28th and again on Thursday June 4th from 7 pm - 7:45 pm. Dr. Johnson Bhembe is a psychiatrist with Cambridge Health Alliance, and an Associate Professor in Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Johnson Bhembe sits on the Harvard Medical School Inter-Society Multicultural Fellows Committee, as well as, serves as a Faculty member for the Harvard Medical School Community Service Committee. She will share some supportive suggestions on, among other topics, how to manage our children's anxiety during this school closure. We hope you can join us and find this informative and helpful.

As always, we are here to support and collaborate with you. Please join me in expressing appreciation to our special educators for all they are doing for our students. They can answer any questions about the educational materials and lessons. Should you have concerns or questions about the special education process,

the special education leaders in your child's school and the Office of Student Services are poised to help in any way possible.

It is with deep admiration that I thank you for the yeoman's task you are finding yourselves shouldering. I hope that you are able to find the silver linings and enjoy seeing your children learn. I know that some days are better than others as I do the same in my house.

Yours in service to education,

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