



# Mount Sinai Union Free School District

118 North Country Road  
Mount Sinai, New York 11766  
(631) 870-2550  
(631) 473-0905 (Fax)

**Maureen Poerio**  
District Clerk/Executive Assistant

**Gordon Brosdal**  
Superintendent of Schools

**Lynne Kirchenko**  
District Treasurer

April 16th, 2020

Dear Mount Sinai Families,

I hope this letter finds you all safe and healthy. This is certainly the strangest month any of us have experienced in education, let alone in life. When I think back on the things we were concerned with as a school only a month ago they all seem so trivial. The easiest part of running a school has become the hardest: Ensuring that all of the students are safe and receiving an education every day.

What has made this so difficult is that for the first time we have students receiving their education in different settings, formats, times of day and with different levels of access to materials. In a school setting we are able to “level the playing field” and ensure that no matter what is happening at home our students are getting what they need from 8:55 to 3:15 every day. In today’s uncertain climate that is nearly impossible but it is a goal we are striving to work towards.

I’ve been a principal for eight years in total, three here at Mount Sinai, and I can honestly say I’ve never received the amount of kind feedback about teachers that I have over the past few weeks. It’s been one of the things getting me through the long days at home. Thank you to everyone who has written a quick email to tell me a nice story or thank a teacher for something they did. It’s been heartwarming and I appreciate every one of them.

That being said, we are aware that “distance learning” is still a work in progress. Our teachers are attending virtual workshops and working together to refine their practice and keep finding ways to educate our students. Being on the inside and seeing the work that teachers are putting in I can assure you we are working nearly 24/7 to provide the best education we can while also attending to our own families’ needs.

As the possibility of a longer closure looms on the horizon there are a few issues I’d like to address in a “Frequently Asked Questions” format. These are a few questions I’ve gotten from parents throughout the last month.

### **Will students be assessed?**

The closure period started just as we wrapped up our 2nd trimester. That made it easy for us to calculate numerical grades for the 2nd trimester. We are now, however, facing the possibility of a third trimester without ever having stepped foot inside of our building if the state continues to close schools past April 29th.

This forces us to strike a balance where our students should be recognized for completing assignments at home but we also need to recognize the unique circumstances of many of our families at the moment. **As a result, we will be moving to a binary “Pass/Incomplete” grade for subjects to close out the school year if the closure extends beyond April 29th.** Teachers will be collecting assignments digitally and students will be recognized for completing these assignments successfully.

### **Moving Up/Graduation/Yearbook**

Unfortunately, I have a hard time envisioning a gathering of hundreds of people by the end of this school year even if we were to return. As a parent of a Kindergartener myself this is heartbreaking but true. We will find a way to recognize our Kindergarten and 4th Grade students at some point and in some way but it will have to be different than a traditional June graduation ceremony at Mount Sinai. Mrs. Guise and Mrs. Wesolowski have also been working hard to ensure that our 4th Graders still get their yearbooks!

## **Kindergarten Screening**

With current guidelines advising at least a six foot distance at all times it would be impossible to have a teacher working one-on-one with an incoming Kindergarten student. When the time comes where this guideline is no longer in place, be that in the spring or summer, we will reschedule Kindergarten screening.

## **Workload**

I think this is the area where we are working that hardest to get it just right while also being the area that is most unique for each family. I've had families emailing about the same assignment, from the same teacher, stating that the assignment was simultaneously too much work and not enough work. I don't think that either parent is wrong, I think that we are all in different places personally and professionally. Some parents are working from home while others are out of work. Some parents have multiple digital devices while others have none.

We are working on making our work more editable online or digital to prevent the amount of ink and paper parents are using at the moment. We're also working to make the assignments as close to school as possible without asking parents to be teachers. As someone said to me today, this is different than home schooling because home school parents sign up for this willingly. None of you signed up for this!

Our teachers are working with our staff developers from Teachers' College to continue the work we've been doing in ways we never envisioned having to do. The most important thing your kids can keep doing is reading books with guidance from our teachers on the kinds of skills they should be practicing while reading.

If the work is too much or frustrating for your children, take a break or stop. This should not be a time when we are stressing our children out over academics at the elementary level. We are trying to keep the momentum going while making sure our students are happy and learning.

## **Planning for 2020/2021**

This is the time of year when we as educators start planning for the following school year. This year will obviously pose unique challenges in ensuring we are ready to meet the needs of our students whenever we return to school.

In the next few weeks you will see our "negative request" form posted to the elementary school website. Teachers will be working to sort classes for next year throughout the spring but the process may not be complete by the end of June. There is a strong possibility you will find out next year's teacher in the summer. I would much rather take the extra time to get the process right than rush something as important as class placement.

I also foresee a strong focus on the social/emotional needs of our students whenever we return to school. Whether it's April 30th or September 1st, our students have been through a very strange and unique time and we will focus more than usual on community building and our students' safety and happiness.

I hope that this letter answered a few questions that I know parents have been asking. I also hope that your kids know how much we all miss them and that we wish you all health and safety at the moment. Stay safe and stay in touch.

Sincerely,

Rob Catlin  
Principal  
Mount Sinai Elementary

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