

Middlesex Borough Schools opt for virtual-only start to academic year

Pending state Department of Education approval, Middlesex Borough Schools will commence the academic year with virtual-only instruction.

More than 130 school districts statewide, including at least eight from Middlesex County, have applied for an all-remote start to the school year, according to [NJ.com](https://www.nj.com).

In a communique to families, Middlesex Borough Schools Superintendent Frederick Williams said all faculty, staff and administrators will report weekly to classrooms and district offices Monday through Thursday.

With the exception of the district's custodial team, all faculty, staff and administrators will work remotely on Fridays.

"The most recent Executive Order of the Governor requires that I, as Superintendent, certify that not only is it healthy and safe to re-open but I must also certify that we have fully met all requirements within the checklist provided by the Department of Education," Williams wrote in his communication to the district.

"I cannot honestly attest to this as I firmly believe that engaging in [in-person instruction] is not the best method, at this time, to ensure the health and safety of everyone. As recently as last week, data was shared via an article confirming more than 97,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in children.

"Those numbers continue to increase. In addition, there is a backlog of many PPE supplies needed with receipt dates, for several, yet to be determined. I commend everyone for working so diligently but it would be irresponsible of me, as your Superintendent, to certify that all things are in

place to conduct a safe and healthy re-opening."

Williams said the district will share additional information in the coming days and weeks.

South River Public Schools will provide a virtual-only instructional program for all students from the first day of school through at least the end of September.

South River Public Schools Superintendent Sylvia Zircher, who made the announcement, said the district plans to commence in-person instruction for students and families who desire that option on Oct. 1, while all others can continue to study remote.

"The COVID-19 pandemic is continuously evolving," [Zircher wrote in a letter posted on the district website](#). "As a result, school districts across the state continue to receive updated guidelines from the New Jersey Department of Education, Department of Health, Department of Labor, and the Governor's office.

READ: [Teacher creates national database of COVID-19-related school closings, cases and deaths](#)

"We are remaining proactive and responsive to these updates and prioritizing the health and safety of our students and staff. We also fully understand the importance of returning to school in a timely manner. We are hopeful (based on current information) that we will have the necessary staffing and equipment in place by October 1 to begin a hybrid, in-person program for those families who are ready to return."

Citing Gov. Phil Murphy's latest executive order, which officially allows school districts to begin the academic year with virtual-only instruction, North Brunswick Township Superintendent of Schools Brian Zychowski and South Plainfield Superintendent of Schools Noreen Lishak informed families

in their respective districts on Monday night that their boards of education will be submitting plans to the state Department of Education for approval to begin the school year all-remote.

"The Governor's latest executive order was initiated by legitimate health and safety concerns for students and educators," Zychowski wrote. "As per the New Jersey Department of Health guidelines, districts must proceed with an abundance of caution to safely open schools for students."

Zychowski wrote that the district will re-evaluate its position for the second marking period and beyond "as this insidious virus continues to provoke changes in the state's operational designs."

In a letter to parents, Lishak said the South Plainfield School District's decision to commence the year with all-remote instruction during at least the first marking period was not made lightly.

"Although the district developed a hybrid in-person learning plan that followed the Governor's parameters, current circumstances including staffing limitations have significantly impacted the anticipated in person opening," Lishak wrote. "Ultimately, this created an environment where monitoring and instructing students in a meaningful manner was compromised."

READ: [North Brunswick, South Plainfield schools opt for all-remote reopening](#)

"Bringing students back into the classroom and our facilities is the most effective way to implement academics, extra-curriculars, athletics, and social emotional programming. However, the safety of our students, faculty, and staff is of the utmost importance to our district. Without full staffing, we cannot operate safely. We intend to monitor these ever-changing circumstances so that we can safely return to an in-person learning environment when feasible."

Perth Amboy, New Brunswick, Piscataway and Highland Park are also pivoting to an all-remote start to the school year.

"Compounding the reality that for the first time in many decades educators are having to make life and death choices is the extremely frustrating lack of federal and state guidance," Highland Park School District Superintendent Scott Taylor said in a video posted earlier this week on the district's website.

"The situation in New Jersey has been especially maddening. Save for some health protection guidance taken from the CDC playbook, school leaders have been given almost no support and left to fend for themselves."

Taylor said the Highland Park School District could not ensure the health and safety of students and educators at this time for in-person instruction.

"The reentry decision information as of Aug. 13 that I analyzed shows insurmountable challenges to providing effective instruction in a dual in-person remote learning environment," Taylor said, adding the Highland Park School District would "slowly but surely transition to an in-person instruction program over the course of the next several months."

New Brunswick Public Schools Superintendent Aubrey Johnson, in a letter posted on his district's website last week, said the New Brunswick Board of Education has authorized him to submit a plan to the state Department of Education to allow for all-remote instruction over the first two marking periods of the school year.

"Ideally, we would like to provide an in-person learning environment beginning this September," Johnson wrote. "However, we are facing a situation that is far from ideal. We are going to err on the side of caution and begin the year using the remote-learning model that we utilized successfully from March through the end of school in June."

Piscataway Township Schools made a decision last week to seek approval

for an all-remote start to the academic year.

"After reviewing the many factors involved in reopening schools this year, and with safety and security at the top of our list of factors to consider, we will submit an all remote instruction plan that will take us through the end of the first marking period, at which point we will make further recommendations based on the health and safety of our students and staff," Piscataway Superintendent of Schools Frank Ranelli wrote in a letter posted on the district's website.

"I understand this decision impacts every family in our district. I want to assure you that our commitment to the education of every child in our schools remains as strong as ever, and that our teachers, administrators, and staff will work together to deliver instruction that encompasses academics, social/emotional learning, and wellness."

Perth Amboy Public Schools Superintendent David Roman announced last week that his district amended its reopening plan, adjusting from a hybrid option for which his district and others across Middlesex County had initially been preparing when Murphy first ordered that all schools must commence the year with some form of in-person instruction.

"We will ensure that staff and students robustly engage in virtual learning during this period of remote instruction," Roman said.

Email: gtufaro@gannettnj.com