August 14, 2020

Dear Head Start Families,

After consultation with the Head Start administrative team, the Parent Policy Council, the CAAS senior management team, and of course, the Office of Head Start, and with unanimous support from all, I have made the decision to reopen our program in September as VIRTUAL ONLY for the time being. That means no in-person classrooms will open at this time.

This decision was very hard to make, but came down to my strong belief that we, as a locality, state, region, and country, are not where we need to be in controlling or even understanding COVID-19 to justify the grave risk to everyone’s health. As we can all see, cases are trending up, and now is not the time.

So what does this mean?

It means that, starting in September (exact date still unknown), we will provide educational, health, family advocacy, and family engagement services to all enrolled families, remotely. We will hold your classroom space for you, and when we reopen, your space will be waiting. If you need and are able to find other sources of childcare you should take them, and you will still be enrolled with us, we will still provide you with family advocacy, engagement, and health supports, and you will always be welcome to participate in any of the educational experiences that we offer.

Meanwhile:

- The Education team is designing a simple virtual curriculum, based largely in social/emotional learning and the Head Start Early Learning Frameworks, that will begin in September. This will involve large group zooms, small group zooms, pre-recorded activities, and “off-line” activities. Each week, families will receive the weekly “school” calendar with links to zooms, as well as links to activities, books, and other free resources so you can continue supporting your children at home as best you can.

- Family Advocacy will continue working with you as they always have, but remotely, through phone calls, texts, emails, and zooms. They will also be helping ensure each family has the technology and the skills to access the educational content that we will be putting out.

- Family engagement will be launching virtual content as well, including ESOL class, Cooking Matters, PConnect, parent and policy council meetings, and so on. Ginger will continue sharing links and information about community resources through various platforms.

- The Health team will continue supporting families in keeping up to date with medical and dental, and with an additional focus on ensuring each of your are set up and supported to access virtual health
portals and telehealth platforms. This team will also be the hub of current information on COVID and tasked with keeping our community informed.

So, you must be wondering: How long will we stay virtual? This is the only answer I can give: I don’t really know and I am afraid to predict. I do not want to reopen for in-person classrooms until something significant changes. That significant thing might be that new cases start truly trending down for a sustained period of time in at least all of Mass. if not all of New England. It could be that enough preschools have opened and stayed open for enough months for us to feel confident that PPE and social distancing works in preschool. It could be that our district and surrounding districts are in the green, SPS decides to reopen and Somerville enters Phase 3. These are the kinds of considerations that could lead to reopening. My personal sense is that we, as a state, are going to move backwards before we can go forward again, and the kind of planning I’m doing, because I’m required to, anticipates not opening before January 2021. I will keep you all informed every step of the way, as things change.

Please reach out to me with your questions. You can email me at jleonard@caasomerville.org, or contact your family advocate if that is more comfortable. I will put all questions (anonymously) into a single FAQ document and share with us all. We will still have an all-program zoom meeting next week, to talk more about this. A link to the meeting will be sent to you by email or text, whichever is your preferred method of communication.

As hard and painful as it has been to reach this decision, I believe in my heart that it’s the right one. Please know that I understand that a continued lack of childcare places a tremendous and very serious burden on you. And I understand that a continued lack of in-person preschool is a terrible, unfair burden on your children. Please know this decision came after much reflection and discussion with stakeholders, and was not, and will not be made lightly. Only the gravest safety concern can ever supersede such important needs, and, unbelievably, that is where we find ourselves now. So, we will make the best of it, we will give it our best, and we will carry each other through it until it’s over.

Stay safe and well,

Jessie Leonard
Director, CAAS Head Start
jleonard@caasomerville.org