May 29, 2020

Dear Students and Parents of the Proctor High School Class of 2020,

I would like to take this opportunity to once again recognize the accomplishments of our graduating seniors. I would also like to thank those of you who have reached out to the district to share your thoughts about graduation, including other options such as a drive through ceremony, an open field ceremony, or postponement of the traditional ceremony.

As I have stated in previous letters to parents, the most important consideration is our responsibility to insure the health, safety, and well-being of our students, parents, grandparents, and teachers during this global Coronavirus pandemic. After much careful consideration, and in light of the governor’s prohibition of mass gatherings, the district believes a virtual graduation ceremony is the only viable option.

Arriving at this decision has been very difficult, knowing how important this milestone is for all of our students and their families. However, the health risks associated with any type of in-person event are far too great, as evidenced by multiple situations in which these types of activities have resulted in a number of students and parents contracting COVID-19 after such events. In fact, recently, several high school students contracted the Coronavirus after participating in a drive through graduation in Atlanta, Georgia. Unfortunately, there is no way for the school to mitigate or prevent any of the health risks associated with holding any type of in-person ceremony or drive through event.

Holding an in-person event, such as a drive through ceremony, open field ceremony, or postponed traditional ceremony poses significant health risks for all persons involved. The 2020 graduating class of Thomas R. Proctor High School is comprised of
approximately 650 graduates and previous graduations were attended by over 5,000 people.

In terms of a drive through ceremony, even if we limited each graduate to two family members, we would have contact with and exposure to over 2,000 individuals at this in-person event. Medical experts caution that sharing or exchanging materials of any kind poses an increased risk for the transmission/spread of COVID-19 which is a dangerous and highly contagious disease. Furthermore, a drive through ceremony poses an issue of equity for students and families that may not have access to a vehicle or other means of transportation. In addition, the district would not be able to prohibit additional spectators from gathering around the event and/or school campus, and could not insure the maintenance of proper social distancing or adherence to the requirement to wear a face covering, as indicated by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Governor Cuomo’s instructions. The restrictions which the Governor has imposed on physical gatherings throughout the state, eliminates the possibility of an in-person event for even the smallest of schools.

The option of having an open field ceremony is also in direct violation of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines and Governor Cuomo’s instructions. If the ceremony was limited to only students and select staff, there would still be 700 individuals present which far exceeds the recommended gathering limit of no more than 10 people. Conducting such a ceremony over multiple days puts teachers, staff and security personnel at repeated risk for contracting and spreading the disease. Again, the district would have no way to prevent students from adhering to social distancing before and after the ceremony. For example, a ceremony was held at a high school in Alabama with precautions taken by the school district to comply with social distancing. However, the district was unable to prevent the students from complying before and after the ceremony. Not only would the district be unaware of a person/persons possibly infected with COVID-19 or persons who have been in contact with a person/persons infected with COVID-19, there remains a portion of the population that is asymptomatic and could unintentionally spread the disease. According to Dr. Michael Saags, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, “The threat of spreading the Coronavirus poses too great a risk to hold such ceremonies. Virus carriers without symptoms could unknowingly infect others.”
In terms of postponement of the traditional ceremony, there is no guarantee that a traditional ceremony could be held on the date of postponement or any date thereafter as medical experts have indicated that the current situation is not something that may change in the near future. There is currently a high degree of uncertainty as to whether school buildings can even reopen in September. According to Robert Redfield, the director for the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), a resurgence of COVID-19 could hit harder than the original outbreak has. Redfield anticipates the second wave of the disease could arrive by fall and peak by December. Additionally, experts, including Dr. Marc Lipsitch, a professor of epidemiology at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and director of the Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics, have also indicated that resurgence is likely to hit in the fall if not sooner. It should be noted that in response to a recent letter sent to the Governor by the New York State Senate, petitioning the Governor to allow in-person graduation ceremonies, Governor Cuomo has refused to predict when large gatherings will be permitted due to the uncertainty of the course of this virus. Furthermore, any postponement has implications for student attendance due to conflicts that may arise as a result of post-graduation planning commitments such as the commencement of college studies, military deployment, and/or engagement in the workforce. Above all, guidance from medical professionals and government agencies concur that an in-person event puts the public at too great a risk. The district’s decision to conduct a virtual graduation ceremony is also in line with many college graduations in New York State which were held virtually, including several local colleges such as Herkimer and Mohawk Valley Community Colleges.

In closing, it is with deep regret that these decisions have to be made, and the district does not take them lightly. However, we need to take every precaution necessary to insure the health, safety, and well-being of our students, parents, grandparents, and teachers. The health and safety of our students will always be our number one priority. Once again, congratulations to the graduating class of 2020. We are so very proud of your achievements. Thank you for your understanding and cooperation during these unprecedented times caused by the Coronavirus pandemic.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Joshua Gifford, Principal