



August 21, 2020

Dear Harmony Families,

All of us at Harmony want to extend our sincerest gratitude for our families and students in managing a most difficult start to the new school year. Your children have been a joy to see, both in picking up backpacks and in joining us for zoom sessions in the mornings. Your participation in our community forums and surveys has been incredibly important in planning for this school year, and even more so as it became apparent that the campus would be closed at the beginning. Additional services and resources will be rolled out in the coming weeks as we come up to speed, including enrichment activities, social times for kids, and parent supports. We will provide updates as we move forward.

I would like to extend personal thanks to our faculty and staff, who have worked relentlessly throughout the summer to prepare themselves, and our school, for any eventuality...even handling evacuations in the midst of a 100 year pandemic. I also want to call out Suzi Heron specifically for her strength, as she stands at the middle of the figurative (hopefully) hurricane with incredible heart and resilience. Thank you, Suzi.

In the midst of the many challenges we have been confronting at the school, we are also managing a dynamic and depressing budget picture. Though we were saved from the deepest cuts proposed in May through action by the Legislature in June, the school has had to make cuts, including suspending rehiring our music teacher and an instructional support position for the current school year. In addition, Harmony has incurred additional costs in our attempt to manage COVID risks including construction projects for outdoor classrooms, ventilation, air filtration, online software, home based school supplies, hand washing stations, touchless toilets, cleaning equipment, plexiglass and other mitigation measures. The school has also hired more teaching staff to support the home learning program due to enrollment in that program exceeding expectations. Along with these changes has come a new landscape for many staff. Duties have shifted for instructional staff to distance learning, the cafeteria has shifted to remote distribution, and our garden too has shifted in response.

In the spring, the school began work to restructure garden staffing due to AB5, the independent contractor legislation that restricts schools from hiring independent contractors in lieu of district employees. This mandate forced the school to re-evaluate garden staffing because the independent contractor farmer arrangement used in recent years could not continue.

In the midst of this re-evaluation of garden staffing design, COVID struck, which altered garden services during closure and restricted public access. This new environment raised questions about how a proposed garden/farm assistant position should be designed to best serve the garden and instruction going forward. Later in the spring, with the Governor's May budget revision, Harmony was faced with 10% cuts across the board. In light of this cut, the potential new garden/farm position was put on hold. A month later however, legislative action in June reversed some cuts, offering enough hope to reconsider the position and structure.

In the midst of the budget concerns, it was clear that any duties assigned to a new position would need to be adapted to support student instruction in a COVID environment. In discussion with key staff involved with the garden, I made the determination to lower the priority for farming tasks and increase the priority of garden instructional supervision to support small socially distanced student pods in the garden. By mid-July it was proposed that a Garden Instructional Assistant would be the likely replacement model for the garden post AB5.



About that time however, it became increasingly apparent that the school might not, and eventually could not reopen, and thus our anticipated staffing demands for the garden would need to adapt, yet again. This reality, coupled with increasing costs incurred in July associated with COVID mitigation measures described above, raised questions about the financial feasibility of, and the structure of, a proposed garden assistant position.

As directed by the state, Harmony is required to prepare a revised budget that will be considered by the Board on Thursday August 27. As proposed, the budget postpones the creation of and hiring of a new garden assistant position. Given the many uncertainties the school is facing, it is my recommendation that existing employees including the Garden Coordinator, Maintenance staff, the Garden Liaison and Classroom Aides will be able to meet the needs of the garden through the winter, both during campus closure, and during a potential hybrid reopening.

As more information becomes available, the initiation of a garden assistant position can again be reconsidered. Most pressing to these considerations is the trajectory of the COVID Pandemic and that of our economy in general. The HEROES act proposed by the House of Representatives was not passed by the Senate, and the proposed Senate bill mostly eliminated state funding support. It is unknown if any federal relief will be found for states prior to the election. Further, the election itself is presenting a significant, outsized risk, to financial predictions. The outcome of the election is sure to hold robust consequences to the economy and in turn, our state and local budgets. Further, the strain on social cohesion that we are experiencing as a nation presents additional uncertainties that impact school planning purposes.

Nonetheless, our garden is a core element of our place-based learning program. My recommendations are rooted in the knowledge that the mission, health, and productivity of the garden will continue to be met, even in a different configuration. That being said, concerns have been expressed by members of our community about the potential impact from the ending of the independent contractor farming position. Therefore, I am holding a community forum on Tuesday, August 25th at 6:00pm via zoom to discuss this issue further. I encourage you to attend. I will provide background and will do my best to answer questions that have answers. Later in the week, the board meeting discussing the budget will be held on Thursday August 27th at 6:00pm (7:00pm for open session items). Both meeting links are below.

I thank you for your engagement and your resiliency in this most trying of times. I know that many families are either under evacuation orders or warning at this time. I apologize for the many issues that we must confront at this time. Please be safe.

Community Forum Zoom Link (Tues, August 25, 2020)

<https://zoom.us/j/4673476430>

Board Meeting Webinar Link (Thurs August 27, 2020)

Password: Salmon1935

<https://zoom.us/j/97013137836?pwd=OGQ0MnRlN0FTeU1BUmpJYU13cHZvZz09>

Sincerely,

Matthew Morgan
Superintendent Principal