



## SHREWSBURY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

100 Maple Avenue, Shrewsbury, MA 01545

Tel: 508-841-8400 Fax: 508-841-8490

[schools.shrewsburyma.gov](http://schools.shrewsburyma.gov)



Joseph M. Sawyer, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of Schools

Margaret M. Belsito  
Assistant Superintendent  
Student Services

Amy B. Clouter  
Assistant Superintendent  
Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment

Patrick C. Collins  
Assistant Superintendent  
Finance & Operations

Jane O. Lizotte, Ed.D.  
Assistant Superintendent  
Community Partnerships & Well-Being

Barbara A. Malone  
Executive Director  
Human Resources

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May 12, 2020

To: School Committee

From: Joe Sawyer

Re: Recommendations re: refund of fees & tuitions paid in FY20

Dear School Committee:

At your meeting on May 6, 2020, you heard a report on various options regarding potential reimbursement of fees and/or tuitions that were paid by families where services were then not provided or partially provided due to school closure for the pandemic.

Based on a review of our situation, and with consideration of your feedback and feedback provided to the School Committee by parents via email, I am making the following recommendations to you for each category of fee or tuition at hand.

In making these recommendations, the following question is paramount:

*What is fair and equitable for families who paid the fee?*

There are many legal regulations that the district must abide by that make issuing refunds more complicated and labor intensive than we would like. However, while this inconvenience may slow down our ability to provide refunds, I do not believe that it should be a factor in determining what is "fair."

With regard to what is “equitable,” I think it is important that all families who are owed a refund benefit from refunds that are issued in proportion to what they paid. Some feedback from the School Committee at last week’s meeting, and some subsequent email feedback from families, suggested giving the option to parents whether to apply for a refund. This could allow families who feel that they don’t need the refund and would like for the district to benefit to choose not to apply for a refund. While the district could certainly benefit from the generosity of those families leaving those funds on account, I have concerns about this approach regarding logistics and equity. To provide an optional system would require a new process to be set up to determine whether a family wishes to have certain fees refunded but not others, and it would require a deadline. We know that a significant number of families are having difficulties connecting with us despite our efforts to communicate, whether because of technology issues, work commitments, or otherwise being overwhelmed by the circumstances of the pandemic. I am concerned that creating a situation where families who might be most in need of a refund may not be able to respond to a requirement to apply for it, while other barriers could get in the way of receiving the funds to which they are entitled (such as technology and language barriers). Further, inevitably there will be hardship cases where the deadline is missed and families will appeal for consideration, creating additional complexity to administer such a program. For all of these reasons, I believe the most equitable solution, and one that minimizes confusion and does not create the need for multiple communications and management of various family preferences, is to process and issue checks for all refunds that are due to families.

With regard to tapping into the generosity and financial capacity that surely exists among many of our families, the district would communicate that we would welcome contributions to the Colonial Fund as a suggestion for families who may wish to utilize some portion of or their entire refund to support our schools.

My recommendations are as follows:

- 1) **Food Service:** Given that we have a successful, existing process for funds on account for cafeteria purchases with the Food Service Department, namely that money on account is carried forward to the next school year, while graduating seniors with more than \$10 on account may receive a refund or have their balance transferred to a sibling in a lower grade, **I do not recommend any change to this process, and therefore no action is necessary.**
- 2) **Transportation Fee:** Because bus service was suspended effective March 13 and schools will remain closed for the remainder of the year, transportation service was not provided for approximately one-third of the school year. As a result, I believe it is fair that families are refunded approximately one-third of the transportation fee. This year the transportation fee was \$310, one-third of which is \$103.33. **I recommend that each family receive a refund of \$100 per transportation fee paid,** which will be proportional while also allowing for costs

associated with providing the refund, including check stock, envelopes, and postage. The estimated amount to be returned to families for transportation fees is \$277,000.

- 3) **Extended School Care:** Because the Extended School Care program was closed effective March 13 and schools will not reopen, and families paid for the entire month of March, **I recommend that families receive a refund for days families had paid for in March when schools were closed when their child otherwise would have been provided with care.** Families who already receive an income-based discount for tuition would receive a prorated refund amount. The estimated amount to be returned to families for Extended School Care tuitions is \$85,000, all of which will come out of the appropriated budget as the reserve in this fund has been exhausted.
- 4) **Preschool & Full-Day Kindergarten:** For Preschool and Full-Day Kindergarten tuition, at the time of closure, families had paid seven of the nine installments for the yearly tuition. Families were not billed for their final two installments due at the start of April and May (the yearly tuition is split into nine equal payments from September through May, so there is no June payment). There is no question that the level of service for these programs changed dramatically when the district shifted from in-person school to remote learning. Even though students are being provided with remote learning and support from the closing through June 16 by educators and support staff who are compensated through these tuitions, we know that remote learning experiences are limited due to the limited independence of our youngest children in preschool and kindergarten. As a result, I believe it is fair that families receive a proportional refund for the tuition they did pay that covers the days school was closed in March. Please note that because families pay in nine installments, preschool and full-day kindergarten tuitions paid through the beginning of March had covered 77.8% of the cost of the full year, while preschool and kindergarten had been in session for 65.5% of the school year, a difference of 12.2% of the yearly tuition. **I recommend that families receive a refund representing 12% of the cost of the yearly tuition they had already paid when school closure began** (the fraction of 0.2% will cover costs associated with the refund, including postage). Families who already receive an income-based discount for tuition would receive a prorated refund amount. The estimated amount to be returned to families for preschool tuitions is \$68,000, and the estimated amount to be returned for full-day kindergarten tuitions is \$52,000.
- 5) **After School Activities Program:** For the After School Activity Program (ASAP), some programs had not yet begun and some had held some number of sessions when the closure occurred. I also understand that some ASAP programs were held remotely after school closure. **My recommendation is to refund ASAP fees proportionally according to how many sessions were**

**provided, either in person or remotely.** The estimated amount to be returned to families for ASAP fees is \$10,000.

In closing, it will be important to determine what refund policies will be put in place in advance of charging fees and tuitions for *next* school year, given the uncertainties related to the continuing evolution of the pandemic. The administration will bring recommendations regarding this topic to the Committee at a meeting in the near future.

I recommend that the School Committee vote to approve the following suggested motion:

*That the Committee vote to approve the proportional refund of tuitions and fees paid for optional programming and services that were not provided due to the closing of school due to the coronavirus pandemic as illustrated in the memorandum from the Superintendent of Schools dated May 12, 2020.*

I look forward to answering any questions you have regarding this recommendation at our meeting this evening.