



Kimberly J. Schneider, Ed. D.
Superintendent

Statement by Superintendent of the Mercer County Special Services
School District (MCSSSD) Concerning Reduction in Force

At its meeting on Tuesday, February 2, 2021, the Board of Education approved what is hoped will be a temporary reduction in force including 11 teachers, 19 classroom assistants and one additional member of the professional staff. The effective date will be April 4 for the teachers and March 4 for the classroom assistants.

The Board meeting, conducted on Google Meet, included affected staff as well as parents, other members of the school community and the public. The discussion raised important questions that we would like to address. Most were discussed at the meeting and in a prior public statement but all merit further attention.

Reductions in force are difficult for all concerned. Nothing in this statement should be read to minimize our concern for its impact on the lives of real people or the value of their past service to our students. Everyone is being asked to adjust to the circumstances we face, with the understanding that the actions we take now are designed to prevent even more painful measures in the future.

Impact on Students and Staff

Parents may be assured that their students will be protected in every respect. After the reduction in force (RIF) takes effect, every child will have a teacher and a classroom assistant in the ratios of students to staff required by State regulation. All students with disabilities who require one-on-one attention will continue to have the one-on-one assistant required by their Individualized Education Plans (IEP's).

We understand that many of the students and their parents affected by the RIF love their teachers and assistants. This is no surprise. The replacement of any teacher or assistant as part of this process has nothing to do with their skill, integrity or dedication to their students. The criterion is seniority. Reductions in force are expressly authorized by law as a means of coping with declining student enrollment provided they be implemented on this basis.

Parents should know too that we are proud of our staff as a whole. The new teachers or assistants assigned to affected students will be senior staff with a record of skilled and dedicated service to the students of our District.

The effective date of the RIF is two months away for the teachers and a month away for the classroom assistants. This time will be used to ease the transition for students and their parents. We recognize that the fragility of many of our students requires a stable environment and every effort will be made to preserve it.

We recognize too that parents are concerned about the welfare of their teachers and assistants, as we are. We are hopeful that affected staff members will find positions in school districts able to operate hybrid programs. We will assist them in this regard. The 60- and 30-day notice periods can be used for this purpose. Retirements and other staff attrition may also work to reduce the impact.

All affected staff will be placed on a rehire list to permit them to be called back on the basis of need and seniority, to the extent restoration of student enrollments and growth in revenue permit.

The Financial Reason for the RIF

The single reason for this reduction in force, or the reason which is the basis for all the others, is decline in the numbers of students enrolling in MCSSSD programs during the pandemic. This drop in enrollments did not begin last month or over the last few months but dates back to at least the beginning of the school year.

In June 2020, a total of 561 students were attending one of the MCSSSD schools. Mercer High School then graduated 41 students leaving 520 students overall. Admissions of new students have not been able to catch up since that time.

The shortfalls began with the district's summer program in 2020 when 498 students were budgeted to participate and 427 actually enrolled, a shortfall of 71 students. Anticipation of new enrollments in September permitted the conservative projection that 544 students would attend MCSSSD in the regular school year. As of the end of December 2020, the actual number was 506.

Each year the State certifies our tuition rates and determines what we should be charging, looking at what has been spent on a per-student basis going back two years. When the certified rates are then compared to what the sending districts have been charged, any overcharge must be refunded to the districts and any undercharge must be collected from them in the form of a "charge back." In the face of declining enrollments without commensurate reductions in costs, the magnitude of charge backs to sending districts in 2021-2022 will be unprecedented, likely to hit many of the districts at a time they can least afford them. Any charge backs not collected from sending districts must be paid out of our own emergency reserves.

Although MCSSSD is operating at spending levels in line with prior years, we do not have the same number of students available to share these costs. Costs left unchecked in the face of declining enrollments create a vicious cycle: the higher the tuition, the less the enrollment; the less the enrollment, the higher still the tuition. In the end, if tuitions are not economical, sending districts will not send their students.

In announcing the RIF we described the less painful measures we have implemented in an effort to contain costs, including a hiring freeze for all non-essential personnel, curtailing utility usage and freezing purchases. We are also able to squeeze savings out of shuffling personnel, reduced operating costs for largely vacant buildings, and other one-time savings. Yet none of this is sufficient to offset escalating increases in per-student costs from year to year.

Recognizing this, we looked next at student-teacher ratios on a classroom by classroom basis. They are below State standards and, since some classes have only a few students, offer opportunities for efficiencies. This situation has been under observation and may no longer remain uncorrected.

A reduction in force is the only adjustment of sufficient scale to offset enrollment declines. Of the \$2.6 million loss of anticipated revenue in the 2020-2021 school year, approximately \$420,000 relates to the enrollment deficit for the 2020 ESY program and the remaining \$2.2 million results from loss of enrollment in the regular school year. In the time we have left in this school year, the RIF will prevent the problem from getting worse by approximately \$506,000.

A common question is “Why now?” The better question might be “Why not before this?” Uncertainty about how the pandemic will affect school operations is no longer a reason for inaction.

The Causes of Declining Enrollment

The principal cause of reduced enrollments in MCSSSD is not students dropping out mid-year and returning to their districts but, rather, fewer students signing up. This would include both new students enrolling for the first time and students previously enrolled.

Some have asked whether all-remote learning has reduced student enrollment. With respect to students being withdrawn from MCSSSD in mid-year, the answer is generally no. Students may leave school mid-year for various reasons in a typical year and this year is no different in that respect, but with few exceptions the all-remote learning environment has not been the reason. However, the impact of all-remote learning on new and returning enrollments is much less clear.

MCSSSD offers a unique learning environment for children with special needs. Local school districts send students here they believe they are not able to serve effectively on a 5-day per week basis. In any number of cases, this assessment may be different when the local district is operating on a remote or hybrid basis and the student is home for all or part of the week.

The companion question is why MCSSD has remained all-remote for most of this school year. Recall that our buildings were closed from March 13, 2020 for the balance of that school year. We began the new year on remote, then opened our buildings on a hybrid basis on November 9, 2020 but closed the buildings back down after two weeks; and our buildings have been closed for the most part since. We are now scheduled to resume our hybrid program on April 19, 2021.

These decisions have been based on assessment of risk to students and staff, in accordance with State criteria. Half of our students and 20% of our staff come from areas in which the incidence of Covid-19 has remained high throughout the year. For the same reason no doubt, the Trenton Public Schools have been all-remote all year and their return to school buildings is not scheduled until May 3, 2021.

Communications Leading Up to Announcement of the RIF

The need for an eventual reduction in staff has been looming for some time. The Business Administrator made the first public mention of it at the regular meeting of the Board of Education on January 12, 2021, triggered by the budget process for the new school year then underway.

On January 22, 2021, the Superintendent spoke with the union president and informed her that a RIF was imminent. The full extent of staff to be affected was not known at that time. Throughout the process that followed, focusing on the identification of affected staff based on relative seniority, the union has been advised and consulted.

On January 29, 2021, principals held meetings with affected staff and their union representatives, one of the principals called each staff member personally, and written notices were sent to everyone formally advising them of the Board of Education meeting on February 2, 2021 at which the RIF was scheduled to be considered. The RIF itself will not be effective until March and April. The expectation is that this will be adequate time to then be ready to launch what amounts to a new school year.

Kimberly J. Schneider, Ed.D.
Superintendent, Mercer County Special Services School District

February 4, 2021

Update February 9, 2021

Based on further information, the anticipated savings noted on page 3 of this statement has been revised to \$609,000.