

**A Message to Needham High School Students
from Superintendent of Schools Dan Gutekanst
April 24, 2020**

Hi, I'm Dan Gutekanst the Superintendent of the Needham Public Schools, and I wanted to reach out to Needham High students to check in and say hello. I also want to address members of the senior class.

Never in a million years did I ever expect to be sitting in a deserted and quiet high school classroom taping a video message in the middle of April to tell you I miss seeing you in classes, on the ballfields, or on stage.

This week was supposed to be April vacation and many of you had plans to travel locally or even around the world to hang out with friends, meet new people in France, perform in a concert in Prague, or just loaf around on the beach. I was going to go to Washington, DC to visit my daughters; instead, like you, I find myself standing in line outside the grocery store, waiting my turn to buy limited groceries—supplies that I will never take for granted again—and standing there with my face mask covering an expression that says: *How on earth did we get here? I mean, really, a pandemic? No toilet paper??*

Never did we anticipate that your high school experience—or our lives—would be disrupted in this way. It is strange to be here without the energy, activity, and bustle of students filling the hallways, crowding the bleachers, belting out songs on the stage, finishing up that last piece for the art show, or laughing at Mr. Bookston's awful jokes.

But here we are. And, in the end, we will be OK as a community. In my father's generation, during another time in human history when the world was on edge, millions were drafted or enlisted to fight in WWII. My dad was asked to grab a gun and fight in the Pacific. Today I've just been ordered to stay home on the couch. We'll be OK, but I recognize it's a challenge nonetheless.

I want you to know that your teachers and administrators are still here for you—well, virtually anyway. I know it's been a challenge to shift unexpectedly from the lively and dynamic interaction of a vibrant high school community with almost 2,000 people to the relative solitude of family life and social distancing. Your teachers are working hard and creatively to stay connected with you; make sure you stay engaged and involved. This is especially true as you head next fall into new courses and experiences in your sophomore, junior, or senior year. Everything you are doing, as imperfect and uncomfortable as it is, is preparing you for what

comes next both in school and in life. Make sure you email a teacher or counselor with a question or concern; they'll get back to you with an answer or suggestion.

Right now, teachers and administrators are reviewing our Remote Learning Plan to determine what changes may be necessary to ensure you are fully connected and learning. Up until the last day of school, Friday, June 19th, your teachers will continue to provide new opportunities for learning, and I will expect that you will participate in that work, complete your assignments, and check in with your teachers. And through this experience I bet all of us, teachers, students, and parents will learn new things about one another, our own skills, and this world. In so many ways this is an unexpected opportunity to explore, grow, and discover.

Your parents and family, too, are now also taking responsibility for your learning. And I know that's difficult for busy families and adults who are trying to balance their own work obligations with managing the household and making sure you have the support and space you need to attend to your schoolwork. It's a good time to recognize the stress some family members are under, including for yourself, and acknowledging that at this time in our lives we have to make room for mistakes, be patient with your little brother, jump in to do the dishes, or take your sister for a walk.

Finally, let me take this opportunity to address our seniors, the great Class of 2020. Like Mr. Sicotte, Mr. Ford, and all those who support and care for you, I am especially feeling for all of you right now. I won't pretend to tell you I know what it's like to have senior year yanked out from underneath. I don't. I know athletic teams had scores to settle and records to beat; I know that final concerts and art shows were in the works, and celebrations like prom, senior picnic, and, of course, graduation on Memorial Field were all part of what you expected, what you deserved—right at this moment it's not my place to say “don't worry about it” or “it'll be OK” because I really have no idea how you are feeling about the loss of this singular and anticipated rite of passage we call senior year.

But I can tell you that Mr. Sicotte, the high school administration, staff, and your class advisors and officers are thinking hard about what kind of celebration we can have for the Class of '20. It won't be anything like you had expected or hoped for. But we do intend to recognize you and all of your hard work; I am in the process, in fact, of signing diplomas in anticipation of the completion of your senior year. And we will be thoughtful and creative to ensure our seniors leave NHS with diploma in hand, with many good and lifelong friends in tow, and with wonderful memories of 13 years of learning, growing, and achievement in the Needham Public Schools. We will take care of you, and we will honor you for all you have meant to us and for all you have accomplished.

For now, your job is to be safe and healthy, help out where you can, and engage in the lessons and labs your teachers provide for you.

I'm reminded of something poet Maya Angelou once observed: "Every storm runs out of rain."

I look forward to seeing you again soon! Take care.