December 7, 2021

Dear UCS Community,

This morning, the Board of Education and I met with Utica Community Schools high school students as part of a regular outreach to discuss their experiences. Students met around tables with Board members, administrative team members and myself to discuss their hopes, dreams and concerns. As you can imagine, the conversation was wide-ranging – course selections, facilities, how staffing challenges have impacted them, extra-curricular activities – but there were topics that were universal – the tragedy at Oxford High School and the continued impact of the global pandemic.

In our discussions, students spoke about the tremendous support they have received from their entire UCS team – teachers, staff members, and administrators. The students also spoke about the importance of having additional time to reconnect with family and friends through holiday gatherings that were canceled last year.

These feelings mirror the exact feedback I have heard from staff, parents, other student groups and community members over the past week. All of these conversations have reinforced for myself and the Board of Education the need for a change to our school calendar. Currently, we have two half-days on our schedule during the week that begins our traditional break. Based on a number of considerations outlined in the remainder of this letter, we are revising our school calendar by removing the half days on Monday, December 20 and Tuesday, December 21. In addition, Friday, December 17 will mark the end of the semester and will be a half-day for all students. Our principals will be sharing additional information on how this will impact your children's schedule.

The revised calendar is the right thing to do for our students, families and staff. We are taking this step for several reasons: First, with the rising number of COVID-19 cases and the emergence of a new variant, we want to reduce the possible spread before families gather to celebrate their traditions. Second, considering the recent school violence, we want our students to have an opportunity to regroup and engage with family and friends. Finally, given the current level of staff shortages and the typical number of substitutes needed this time of year, we want to prevent potential problems with key services and classroom supervision during those days.

Considering the staff sustainability issues, UCS continues to make adjustments on hiring, retention, service delivery and compensation. Across our district, team members have stepped up to help ensure that needed services for our students and families continue in a quality fashion. I am proud of the resiliency of this staff and their commitment to do whatever needs to be done to support this community.

In addition, working with the Macomb County Health Department to adjust COVID-19 protocols, we have maintained our long-range goal of in-person learning. Recently, these adjustments have included the use of face coverings and remote learning in select classrooms, grades and even schools. We continue to work with the health department and Ascension MyHealth Urgent Care to help healthy children remain in school if they were identified as close contacts.
Despite these successes, real challenges remain. The adjustment to the school calendar is another example of our work to proactively stay ahead of concerns. I have worked with our staff to make calendar changes related to secondary exams and our overall year end schedule. Your building administrators will be sharing specific information regarding any changes to your child’s classroom schedule, particularly as it relates to secondary exams. Our website reflects the schedule changes.

Finally, I want to express appreciation for your partnership and support. As you celebrate this season with your friends and family members, may you experience good health, happiness and great peace!

Sincerely,

Robert S. Monroe
Superintendent of Schools