

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF OKALOOSA COUNTY

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Back-to-School Update from Superintendent Chambers

I know this is a lengthy update, but I felt it important to thoroughly discuss the safety measures we are putting in place for our students and employees. Note: Some of the information below has recently been included in our Reopening Schools Plan based on feedback and up to date information from the Health Department.

As you know, we have delayed the reopening of schools until August 31st. This is a decision that was not made lightly, but it was made with the safety of our students and employees in mind. Over the course of the last 5 months, we have all had to deal with a new reality, COVID-19, that changed the way we live, think and interact. During this time, I have collaborated and worked with many different people and groups in order to not only comprehend this virus, but even more importantly, to determine how to reopen schools safely. Here's what I have learned through all the conversations, meetings, interactions, and work sessions... everyone has a different opinion as to the best approach to reopen schools. I have been advised to mandate masks by some and by others, to not mandate masks. I have been asked to reopen schools immediately while others say we should start the year online. Many believe this virus is real and others believe it is a hoax. And, even the decision to delay the start of school is supported by many and not by others. In my role as Superintendent, I fully understand that I cannot please everyone with the decisions that ultimately will be made. All of the decisions to reopen school weigh heavily on my heart because our most precious resource, our students, and the backbone of our school district, our employees, are the ones the School Board and I must keep safe.

Over the course of the last 3 months, in order to create our reopening plan, we elicited the input of several groups and to each I am thankful. First, we created a Back to School Workgroup comprised of teachers, educational support professionals, union members, school-based administrators, district staff and the Health Department. This group diligently worked through and problem-solved the countless issues and questions regarding reopening schools safely. After the formation of the Work Group, we also met with principals, School Advisory Council (SAC) representatives, community members and then on July 10th and 13th, we had 459 teachers, educational support staff and administrators take part in a Zoom Meeting where I went over the Reopening Plan. I appreciated the many questions which helped us strengthen our Frequently Asked Questions Document.

Now, we have about 5 weeks until the start of school on August 31st. I want to take this opportunity to share with parents, employees and the community what the district and schools will be focusing on over the next 5 weeks in preparation for the return of our employees and students.

- We are ordering, tracking and distributing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to include items such as masks, individual desk barriers and face shields.
- We are creating and enhancing training for employees to be delivered during the week of August 24th (pre-planning week). Additionally, starting the week of July 27th, employees and parents will begin receiving guiding documents regarding COVID-19. Training topics such as symptom recognition, what to do if someone has symptoms, preventative measures, what to do if someone is sick, quarantine vs. isolation, employee leave, classroom setup, PPE, mySchool Online, social distancing, scheduled cleaning and disinfecting and much more.
- School-based administrators are contacting each student/family who chose to attend school online. They are personally working with each student/family to create a student schedule that fits the requirements for graduation

or progression to the next grade level. This is a monumental and time consuming task they are undertaking, but it is the right thing to do for our students.

- After input from parents and employees, we are working with families who prefer a Blended Model, which would allow students to attend school through mySchool Online and the school building.
- We are investigating the ability to create a synchronous instructional model on specific courses such as IB, AP, ROTC, Band, and CTE. This would allow students to Zoom into the classroom as schedules allow. We are working with our teachers to establish guidelines for this option to ensure teacher comfort levels.
- We are finalizing the teacher training for mySchool Online and iReady (Elementary and Middle) to ensure a smooth academic experience for our teachers and students.
- We are finalizing the creation of signage on the proper use of masks and other preventative measures.
- We are working with Band and Chorus to acquire PPE gear for instrument and face coverings.
- The Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSAA), which governs high school sports, has postponed athletics through August 24th. The FHSAA is anticipated to release guidelines on August 17th which will provide direction moving forward with Fall sports. Until then, athletics will continue with our phased approach.
- In anticipation of the release of the FHSAA Guidelines, we will continue working with surrounding school districts and our district athletic directors regarding Fall athletics.

I am so appreciative and proud of all the work and preparation that has been accomplished to date, and I am confident in the work and plans to be finalized over the next several weeks.

I have shared with all of our employees my belief that “Everyone is Important or No one is Important.” I have taken these words to heart as we have navigated these uncharted waters. In saying that, let me share the many measures we are implementing and investigating for the safety of our students and employees.

- We have delayed the start of school to August 31st.
- We have created a Rapid Response Team that will serve 2 main functions: they will fill in for custodians/cleaners who are out sick and they will deploy to a school to clean and disinfect a classroom or office area where a positive case has been identified.
- We plan to implement a Contact Tracing Team that will serve 2 main functions: they will investigate, in collaboration with the Health Department, to determine close contacts related to any positive COVID cases within our schools. Additionally, they will provide support to our school clinic staff for students or staff presenting COVID symptoms.
- Schools will be afforded a daily substitute to handle emergency coverage needs.
- We are continuing to install plexiglass barriers in front office spaces.
- We have ordered individual desk barriers for every student as well as every employee where practical, understanding that social distancing will be difficult in a school setting.
- We have ordered hand sanitizer for every classroom, office area and complex.
- We have ordered disinfectant wipes for every classroom, office area and complex.
- Students and employees will wash hands as appropriate throughout the school day.
- We have ordered masks for every student and employee and we have ordered face shields for every employee who would like one as well as for students in certain ESE Programs. Currently, we are strongly recommending the use of masks everywhere where social distancing cannot be maintained in accordance with CDC Guidelines. It is important to note that over the next several weeks we will continue discussions with employees and parents on the potential mandate of masks everywhere social distancing cannot be maintained.
- We have ordered clear face masks for Speech and Language Teachers and students
- Students and employees will be required to wear a mask while riding the school bus due to the inability to social distance. In non-air conditioned buses, all windows and vents will be opened to allow for air flow.
- Daily cleaning and disinfecting protocols will be implemented for shared materials.
- High frequency touched areas will be cleaned and disinfected throughout the day.
- Custodial schedules will be adjusted as appropriate to better accommodate cleaning and disinfecting throughout the day.
- Though we appreciate and value our volunteers and visitors, they will not be permitted into schools during the first 9-weeks. This will be reevaluated at the conclusion of the first nine weeks. Essential volunteers will be permitted and must wear a face mask. Parents will be able to come to school to handle normal parent business.

- At the secondary level, we are going to Block Scheduling to reduce the number of students with whom a teacher or classroom assistant comes into contact each day. This will also reduce the number of student interactions each day both in the classroom and hallways.
- We will be mindful of the number of students in a teacher's classroom. This is a difficult topic because my goal is to keep class sizes as low as feasible. If we cut class sizes in half, we will need to double our teaching staff which cannot be funded. If we cut our class sizes in half, we would need to double the number of classrooms for students to attend, which do not exist. We are still brainstorming this topic because we know how important this is to teachers and parents.
- We are mandating the display of signage throughout campuses for preventative measures, as well as creating videos to help inform employees and students/families.
- Employees and students will be required to take their temperature prior to the start of school.
- We will ask parents and employees to complete a Wellness Check prior to coming to school each day.
- In order to limit the touching and sharing of devices, at the elementary level, we will go to a 1 to 1 computer model. K – 3 students will receive an iPad and Grades 4 – 5 students will each receive a Chromebook.
- Each school will create a secondary clinic/space in order to keep students and employees who might have symptoms or be a close contact separated from others.
- Upon the school district's notification of a positive case concerning an employee or student at a school site, the parents and staff of that school will be notified that an individual at the school has been identified as testing positive for COVID-19. Due to HIPPA laws, we are not permitted to identify the student or employee. Additionally, any employee or student deemed a close contact will be contacted by the Health Department.
- Human Resources is working purposefully to safeguard high-risk employees in terms of both privacy and health as decisions are made across the district.
- Employees will receive paid leave if forced to isolate due to being identified as a "close contact" of someone in the classroom or worksite. Employees will work closely with Human Resources to ensure that Emergency Medical Leave and Personal Leave is reserved for their own illness, positive test, or identification as a "close contact" in a non-work environment.
- If an employee exhausts Emergency Medical Leave and Personal Leave due to COVID-19, unpaid leave will be approved until officially cleared to return.

For the first time since the Spanish Flu in 1918, we are experiencing a global pandemic that has impacted our country and the world. This virus has created fear, anxiety and discord throughout our country. I know many of you are also experiencing your own emotions pertaining to COVID-19 and I understand that. We will continue to communicate and work together as we prepare for the upcoming school year. I am comforted and humbled by your support and willingness to be a part of the solution and offer suggestions and advice for the betterment of our school district. We will get through this together and together we will continue making a difference in the lives of students.

Over the course of the next 5 weeks we will continue to stay in contact with each of you and we will continue to listen to your concerns and suggestions. For more information on the Reopening Plan, Frequently Asked Question Document and mySchool Online, go to Okaloosaschools.com and you can email questions or concerns to reopening@okaloosaschools.com.

Respectfully,

Marcus Chambers