

Friday, May 29, 2020

We had our first Parent Advisory Group meeting today. It is our intention to publish all questions and answers on social media following each meeting. We hope to keep everyone informed as our August school opening plan evolves.

It is our intention to open school as scheduled on Aug. 10, 2020. We will follow the CDC guidelines for opening schools to the best of our ability; however, we realize not all parents will be able to send their children back to school. We are planning to operate with students in attendance concurrently while offering home school options for those students who may not be able to attend school.

The CDC guidelines are guiding principles, not absolutes. We will follow CDC guidelines given the spacing limitations of our classrooms and schools. There are approximately 7,000 students in TPSD, many attending schools built before 1950. Many of our classrooms are small. We only have three options:

1. Provide a concurrent model of home school and traditional school while attempting to achieve social distancing for students who attend school.
2. Provide a traditional classroom model on an A/B schedule where half the students attend on Mon and Tuesday and the other half attend on Thursday and Friday which would allow for maximum social distancing.
3. Close schools and only provide home school distance learning.

The direction from the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) has been to prepare a hybrid model of home school and in person classroom instruction and prepare for intermittent school closures throughout the school year.

It is our intention to incorporate feedback from the community and staff while monitoring CDC guidelines and the number of COVID-19 cases in Mississippi. We will release a complete Blueprint for opening school on June 15.

Questions from Parent Advisory Group

Are students going to wear masks?

We have not made a decision about students wearing masks. There will be some parents who send students to school with masks. Students will be allowed to wear masks.

What measures are being taken to protect staff?

We are purchasing face shields and other PPE for staff. We are also purchasing sound amplification systems for classrooms, so teachers do not have to project directions to students in a loud voice. We are going to provide increased janitorial services and increased sanitizer each day in classrooms. Principals are meeting with teachers to gain feedback on other efforts that we can consider. We have also hired six new nurses. This will allow us to now have a certified nurse at each school.

Will paper towels be placed both inside and outside the doors entering bathrooms?

Bathroom facility areas are a big concern. We will monitor bathrooms a lot more frequently and limit how many children will be allowed to use the bathroom at one time. We are also purchasing large tubs of sanitizer wipes to place at the doors.

Will everyone have to enter the one entrance where thermal scanners are located?

Yes. We will limit entryways so everyone has to go through the thermal scanners. It is for everyone's protection.

Will kids start using Chromebooks with distance learning?

Yes. We have purchased 3,700 new Chromebooks to meet the needs of all our students.

To meet the guidelines of social distancing, will arrival and dismissal times be different?

We will stagger dismissal and arrival times. There is no way to have 400 kids coming through doors at same time and provide for social distancing. This is something we are diligently working on right now to implement.

Will you have to downsize classes?

We are in the process of getting rid of extra furniture to allow for more space in classrooms. We will establish limits on class sizes at each level. We have asked principals to balance class sizes according to space limitations and social distancing efforts.

Will there still be recess?

We will continue to have recess, but it will be one class at a time.

Will school maintain normal hours?

Our school day will be consistent with past practice and new staggered start and dismissal times.

Will there be an option for parents to do distance learning only and will in-person attendance be mandatory?

We are working to provide a concurrent model for in-school and out-of-school learning to accommodate parents who aren't able to send students to school. Attendance will be required, and we will be able to better monitor attendance of home school students with CANVAS.

Will there still be Center Time for younger children?

Yes, but it will look different and there will be fewer children in Center Time sessions.

Is there a plan to help teachers and students who thrive in small groups and interventions?

These groups will be smaller. There is no way to put a lot of students face-to-face with each other and practice social distancing. We will utilize assistants to help with smaller groups.

Will there be new guidelines for buses?

We are sending out a survey to see how many students will ride buses. Based on actual numbers, we will adjust routes to get the best usage.

Are you expecting teacher shortages?

We do anticipate there will be some teachers with health issues who decide to retire earlier than expected, and that could lead to a shortage.

With doing both in-class instruction and distance learning, are you concerned this will be too much of a load for teachers?

There will be more work involved with a concurrent model. We are confident our principals, teachers, and support staff will rise to the challenge and continue the tradition of excellence in the Tupelo Public School District. We don't know how many students are going to participate in distance learning, so we have not yet settled on a plan for distance learning. A survey will go out that is school specific regarding distance learning.

Is there a plan to hire just on-line teacher to help with the burden?

We are researching now to see what is the best model to deliver on-line education.

Will there still be ability grouping?

We will have flexible grouping strategies that are balanced to accommodate social distancing.

Will we still have Challenge classes?

Yes.

If students don't go back to regular school and do distance learning, will they be able to participate in sports and other activities?

Yes.

Will there be an impact on transition to District of Innovation?

We had a conversation with MDE today about this. There will be adjustments that will have to be made, especially with Project Lead the Way. PLTW could be suspended during this pandemic time. However, the pandemic should not impact our Middle College or Project Search. We may also find we can expand our District of Innovation plan, such as with flexible learning environments that are customizable for families, because education is not a one size fits all.

If there is a student or staff member who tests positive for COVID-19, will we close that school for a period of time?

Yes. And that school will be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized during that school closure. We've been told to prepare for intermittent closures.

Will there be attendance requirements for distance learning?

Yes. CANVAS is able to hold students accountable for attendance.

Will there be the same expectations for students who participate in distance learning?

Yes. Students will be held to the same standards as students who attend school.

How will we address what wasn't taught at the end of the year?

We will start this school year with a focus on acceleration to try and get everyone caught up.

We will not focus on remediation

Do you expect a decrease in State funding?

We do expect reduced funding. That's going to be national, and that will add to a level of anxiety of everyone.

What about school supplies?

We are making that purchase from the district level this year. We will purchase all school supplies. Our teachers will have enough supplies to handle everything. If you want to donate, do so through your school's PTA/PTO organization.

Will parents be able to have lunch with students and will there be field trips?

For the time being, field trips will be virtual and parents won't be allowed to have lunch at school with their students.

What is the plan for home learning for ELL students?

That is something we are working on with Mrs. Dunklee, and we will have a plan in place for the first day of school

What if a student or staff member is exposed to someone with the coronavirus?

Any individual who tests positive for COVID-19 will have to stay home during a 14-day quarantine period.

Will kids be sprayed with Lysol or a disinfectant?

No. We will spray our buildings down every night, but not our children or staff.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is an evolving school opening plan. I may have missed a few questions from today, but I will catch them up next week. We will have another WebEx meeting next Thursday at 12:00 pm. Our principals and our teachers are working hard on our plan. Rest assured they are committed to providing the safest learning environment imaginable for our students. School will look different in August, but I think we will grow through this experience in amazing ways that demonstrate the enormous potential in the Power of We.

Thank you for being a part of the One Single Heartbeat!
The Tupelo Way!

Dr. Picou