

July 23, 2020

Reopening Peninsula Schools in Fall 2020

By Dr. Art Jarvis, Superintendent

As your superintendent I feel the need to make a strong recommendation to the Board of Directors regarding reopening our schools. In these extraordinary times, many factors drive our patrons, our staff, our children and our leaders to a variety of thought positions about the reopening of our schools, some of which are aligned and many of which are disparate and highly diverse.

I would speak to a number of elements which immediately provide a wide range of thought regarding the “right decision”. First, I would address thoughts regarding the children. We recognize that our children effectively have been out of school five months, since March 12, and many families and children are eagerly awaiting a reopening. At the same time, recent weeks have brought increased anxiety. There are clear indications that parents are weighing whether it is safe yet to return children to a school setting. Direct concerns about child safety, as well as concerns about youth being transmitters, are generating significant challenges whether schools can provide the necessary level of safety.

A second issue regarding children looks at a different aspect. Many articles and studies verify the social emotional needs of children. Schools provide great opportunities for social interaction regardless of the configuration of the classrooms and hallways. Playgrounds, recesses, and normal interchanges between students are difficult to imagine in an expectation of social distancing. Debates about regulating factors such as face coverings recognize the difficulty of regulating such needed social interaction.

In short, we are witnessing a definite shift in the readiness of parents to send their children back to school at this time.

Beyond the aspect of children we can examine the world of Peninsula School District as the largest employer in the community. It is easily recognized that we engage a large, complex workforce to provide the educational program and services. A closer look provides insight into some of the challenges underlying the reopening of the schools.

Ours is not a world of production and machines. Ours is a universe of personal touches and interactions. Kindergarten hugs and runny noses are but two in a list of hundreds of normal happenings each day. Health department requirements such as temperature checks, six-foot distancing, and face coverings, are just the surface of trying to regulate social contacts in a world constructed of constant social interaction. One recent statement by health officials captures the essence, “(We) cannot imagine a way to open schools without the risk of significant transmission of COVID-19...” Unfortunately, the positive infection curves of the late spring have surged to new and dangerous levels in recent days. The optimism of early recovery has faded and in its place is widespread

fear and even panic. This morning, Dr. Anthony Chen, Director, Tacoma Pierce County Health Department, repeated that he does not believe it is safe to return children to school in September.

It must be recognized that the effort to keep children safe is only one key part of the challenge. Equally challenging is the need to protect the health of our staff. The design of the safety protocols is not only intended to prevent transmission between children, but to avoid infecting the caregivers and their families. Unfortunately again, recent surges in the virus have translated into extraordinary levels of concern and anxiety in the staff. Scientific predictions of hundreds of thousands of deaths scare all of us and our staff is no different. We have a very senior staff. Many of our school bus drivers for example are retired citizens who have found this driving as a wonderful way to spend their time and interact with families and students. In this pandemic world, that changes quickly to a picture of many bodies in a closed bus – an incubator. This for a work group that consists of high-risk people.

Recent messages from our staff reflect vulnerability, uncertainty and fear. Theirs is not the worry about how to keep a mask on a five-year old; theirs is the knowledge they will most certainly be exposed. Like all of us, they reflect on those at home or in their families that will be endangered. On the human side, that risk is very real; in the end, from a management view, there is a serious question whether we can keep our workforce to make our education model work.

Perhaps this explains why we are seeing the daily reports from school districts in the region, state and nation rejecting their carefully constructed plans to return children to the schools in-person. The best plans simply cannot overcome a surging, spiking pandemic.

We have invested an immense amount of time and effort into creating a plan for two educational platforms – on-site/in-person learning and a full-blown remote learning and teaching system. The original plan has been to implement both with the September opening of school. I will now recommend a change to that plan. It is my recommendation that the plan be implemented in stages. I am recommending the opening of school in September be remote only. The target date for full implementation with both platforms will be January. In the meantime, we will develop a “dial” of stages that allows us to move from stage to stage by planned increments.

Thank you.
