

June 29, 2020

Dear Parents, Staff, and Students,

Summer is supposed to be a carefree time and a chance to recharge, but I know there's also a tremendous amount of anxiety right now for all of us about how we'll reopen schools this fall. I wanted to provide an update about where we are in this process. This is long, but important.

1 – Thanks to all who filled out our surveys. We have been analyzing all the results and comments, and we have posted the numeric results on the [Reopening School](#) page on our website.

2 – The **Reopening School** webpage has lots of information and I encourage you to visit it. We've collected a number of local, state, national, and international reports issuing consideration and guidance to schools, and placed them on the site. Many are similar. None are completely prescriptive. The PA Department of Health has given specific directives to places such as restaurants, telling them to open at 50% capacity. However, they have only issued 'guidelines' and 'considerations' to PA schools. It is up to each of the state's 500 school districts to individually take that guidance and sort through how to make it work. As an educator who doesn't have a medical background and is being asked to make significant public health decisions, this is extremely frustrating.

3 – Our Reopening Task Force begins its work on an extremely tight and condensed timeline this Wednesday, July 1, via zoom. At the beginning of the meetings, I will lay out our very preliminary plans for how we hope to reopen schools, and that presentation will be recorded and placed on our website after the meetings and will be emailed (likely on July 2.)

- More than 800 parents signed up to serve on our task force. We increased our original size from 30 to 50 members per group; We felt that more than that would be counterproductive. It was difficult to select members, and we appreciate everyone's willingness to participate.
- Our task force groups will meet three times to discuss the tentative plans and its implementation. We wanted to wait for additional guidance from the Department of Education before convening these groups.
- Our staff groups will continue to meet through the end of July and August.
- **We will publicly present (via zoom) our reopening plan on Tuesday, July 21** and will email you a copy of that plan.
- All plans are tentative until approved by the School Board (**July 27.**)
- Plans will include contingencies for our county returning to a Yellow or Red phase.
- Please visit our School Reopening page for a complete timeline.

4 – The nature of how medical professionals understand covid-19 is evolving. Since the state has not provided specific directives, it's up to us to work together as educators (our county superintendents meet weekly and have been meeting throughout the pandemic, we meet with

superintendents regionally, and we meet regularly as a district management team) to try to interpret medical guidance and considerations, and find ways in which we can reopen safely but also provide a positive school experience for our students. Opinions are split – while most parents want to see school reopen, many are concerned about how that should occur, and there are widely differing thoughts. We are aware of the incredible challenge that any kind of split schedule places on not only our parents who must return to work, but also our staff members (critical to our ability to reopen) who may not be able to access child care with a schedule such as A/B (50% of students in one day, 50% in the next) or one week on, one week off (again, only bringing in 50% of students at a time.) We also know that whatever we do, many of our parents, students, and staff will be disappointed, angry, and anxious. We do hope everyone will understand that we are trying to be cognizant of a wide variety of guidance, issues, concerns, and opinions, and that these are extremely difficult choices. We will do our very level best to be transparent, responsive, supportive, and positive.

5 – Ultimately, the biggest issue driving the reopening of schools is “distancing,” or how far apart we must keep our students and staff. Most reports suggest a 3 – 6 foot distance “when feasible.” It is generally accepted that 6 feet is the gold standard, but 3 feet is sufficient to provide mitigation of covid. For West Chester (and most public schools) it comes down to this:

If we must provide 6 feet of separation between desks, we simply cannot bring all students back to school five days a week because we will not have enough space to accommodate them.

As our custodial staff set up some classrooms with a 6-foot model so that we could see how that would work across the district, rumors spread that our plan was to bring in younger grades each day, and ask our older students to do school online. While this is an option, it is not our preferred plan.

Tentatively, we are planning to provide a minimum of 3 feet separation (6 feet when possible) and to bring all of our students into our classrooms five days a week.

- **Some form of masking will be required for all staff and all students (details are being developed, but we expect that every student will be required to have a mask available at all times in case 3 feet separation can't be maintained such as when a teacher comes to work with them.)**
- **We will need to make significant modifications to the school day at all levels. School will not look or feel the way it used to, and we must rely on the positivity and compassion of our parents and staff to support our students through it.**
- **Parents will be asked to provide transportation when possible. Our bussing plans are still being developed.**
- **We anticipate we may take student and staff temperatures at the entrances of all of our schools and buildings.**
- **There are many, many more small but significant details that we will work through and spell out on July 21, after our task force groups have met.**

6 - For any parent who does *not* want their child to return to in-person school, we have launched our [WC Cyber Program](#) (that was being developed over a year ago for grades 6 – 12.) It will provide quality, online instruction for grades K – 12, rivaling any cyber charter school. Classes are being taught by our own teachers, with a curriculum that aligns to our in-person curriculum, and will provide a smooth transition back to traditional school if parents choose that path at some point. This will not be like our spring pandemic remote learning. We urge our parents to please consider this option instead of a cyber charter school, where student performance data (accessible on the PA Department of Education website) is typically extremely poor. Our district must, by law, pay tuition for each student who chooses to attend an outside cyber charter school (more than \$14,000 per year for each ‘regular’ education student and more than \$31,000 per special education student.) This is a significant drain on our public school system that is already facing significant financial challenges due to covid-related expenses.

7 - As of July 1, our tracks, tennis courts, and fields are open for community use from dawn to dusk.

Again, information about our Cyber Program is on our website. More is being added weekly. Registration is open now for grades 6 – 12, and will be added soon for grades K – 5.

Our entire administrative team has heard from hundreds of parents via email and phone calls over the last few months, and we understand the wide range of concerns. As a parent with children in our schools, I have them, too. We will work to provide the best possible experience for our students while doing our best to keep everyone safe. We are a school district that prides itself on community, compassion, and excellence in education. We must remember that as we move forward.

If you have questions/concerns that you’d like to share, please email reopening@wcasd.net.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration, and stay tuned for more information.

Jim Scanlon, Superintendent