

Cape Schools Open Minds and Open Doors

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Superintendent's Report to School Board
School Board Meeting
August 18, 2020

Good evening, and again, thank you for attending our meeting tonight. I wanted to do a quick review of where we are as we have been working through plans this summer. The district administrative team has been meeting usually twice a week all summer to develop a framework for the return of school which was presented to the School Board on July 28, 2020. This framework included two green designations, one of which would mean that we could have everyone return to school, as usual, without restrictions, or a green in which everyone could return to school following the Maine CDC and the Maine DOE recommendations, requirements, and guidelines. The yellow plan within the framework is a hybrid model in which ½ the students attend on designated maroon days and ½ of the students attend on designated gold days, complying with the recommendations and requirements. The final plan within the framework is the red plan in which everyone is assigned to the 100% remote learning plan.

On July 31, the Governor designated all counties in Maine as green counties which means that 100% of the students can return to school, however guidelines and requirements must be followed. Unfortunately, our classrooms are not large enough to ensure the 3 feet social distancing guidelines for classes of 15-20 students, nor do we have facilities for the 6 ft social distancing requirements for eating for all of our students at once. We do not have the space to divide all classes in half and have everyone in our buildings, nor do we have the resources to hire certified teachers to teach those classes.

Given those limitations, the district administrators reviewed many types of schedules and structures, and the details that accompanied all of those schedules and structures. We examined the feasibility of sanitizing and disinfecting during each, transportation with social distancing requirements, entrances to buildings, traffic in hallways, medical, health, and safety needs, and the list goes on. We discussed an AM/PM possibility with half the students attending in each session, however determined that it was impossible to thoroughly sanitize the classrooms and school in the 1 hour between sessions. We studied the maroon on Mondays and Tuesday and, gold on Wednesdays and Thursday but realized that a maroon/gold, maroon/gold schedule was a better educational model with direct instruction followed by practice rather than two instructional days in a row. We developed a green, yellow, and red framework that was then presented to the District Planning Team for feedback. This team consisted of teachers, parents, administrators, district nurses, a school psychologist, and School Board members. The framework was revised according to their comments and presented to the School Board. On July 28, 2020 the plan was adopted by the School Board. We then heard from many teachers who requested that the support/PD day be changed from Friday to Wednesday in order to support them with child care, and to provide midweek planning time. We did make that change to meet their needs.

Then on August 11, 2020 the Board met to discuss and adopt the plan in the framework for returning to school. After a lengthy discussion the Board determined that more information was needed and tonight's meeting was scheduled. The decision is a difficult one for the Board and we know that we cannot fully please everyone and meet everyone's needs. However, the hybrid plan offers parents a choice, 100% remote learning or 2 days a week in school with remote support and instruction on the at home days.

This week, more district administrative meetings occurred along with conversations, meetings, and tours with HVAC experts, a conversation with an epidemiologist, and communication with our district physician Smita Sonti. The Board requested presentations by an HVAC expert and by an epidemiologist, however, these experts are being advised by their organizations to be cautious in their recommendations to schools due to the legal implications of their statements. For example, this is an email we received from an HVAC expert:

“Mechanical Services is having our lawyers follow-up on what we should and should not be saying in regard to buildings and Covid-19. We certainly can’t say a building is completely safe. However, we can stick to the facts and say that doing something like we discussed on Friday “will improve ventilation in the hallways”. There is not enough information at this point to say how much it will improve or whether it is enough (even if we are of the opinion that it is), which is what everyone is going to want to know including the press who will be attending.

What we have been doing is providing assistance and information to facilities managers, and they have been relaying that information to the superintendent and school board.”

Tonight, we heard from our district physician, Smita Sonti. Her message to me earlier this week stated, “In my brief review of the state epidemiological data, our local schools and the current low transmission in the community, it is my feeling that schools in this community can safely reopen, with all the hard work and infection control that is and will be in place. As far as ventilation concerns, I think getting an expert in is a very good idea, but even in old buildings, the risk is mitigated by diligent screening of students and staff, and infection control (such as masks and hand washing).”

Perry will be speaking on the condition of ventilation at Pond Cove and the middle school and on our successful efforts to improve ventilation in the hallways of the high school and the nurse’s room in the high school. Our buildings are old and we know that they have limitations due to their age. We will soon be resuming our meetings with the Building Committee and will continue our discussions about how to deal with these limitations. For now, our efforts are aimed at making our buildings safe for our students and staff.

In addition, Noel will be discussing efforts to improve connectivity outside our buildings in order to provide outdoor classroom settings for our teachers and students. Principals and Assistant Principals have been, and will be, surveying their grounds for outdoor settings and schedules will be developed for classroom use of those settings as long as weather conditions permit. Masks will still be required and 3 ft social distancing requirements will be followed.

Principals and Assistant Principals, along with school nurses have been walking hallways within our buildings to develop traffic patterns, to identify procedures for using bathrooms and hallways and to develop opportunities for mask breaks and increased handwashing. Those details will be shared with parents to review with their students before the start of school.

Signage and PPEs are arriving in-district. We are using the high school cafeteria for our storage area and PPEs will be distributed to each school for use during the first month of school. Storage for the remainder of the PPEs will be at the high school and additional requests will be filled from the high school at the request of each school. Signage will be displayed throughout the schools in the next week.

We have had many comments about fall sports. In Maine, the Maine Principals Association (MPA) is the governing body of sports, although each district can opt to participate or not, in any sport. The MPA sets requirements and rules for sports and oversees plans for the scheduling of events. Currently we are awaiting the ruling of the MPA regarding fall sports. A large factor in the decision about whether or not to sanction fall sports is the matter of social distancing requirements. In the latest guidelines from the

MCDC which are provided in our supporting documents for tonight, outdoor requirements of 14 feet for social distancing without masks and 6 feet of social distancing outdoors and indoors with masks, is required. Communication from the MPA regarding fall sports will be shared as we receive it. District discussions will continue around our fall sports offerings and our ability to meet CDC guidelines should we move forward with the fall sports season.

We know that you are all eager for information regarding the start of school, as district administrators are eager for clear direction regarding the plan in which we will start. In addition, we realize that teachers are eager to plan for the start of their year, as they start back at work on Monday. We are in the process of compiling remote learning enrollment requests and principals will be able to finalize their class lists and publish those lists based on that information. In addition, bussing schedules will be developed based on those students who will attend in-school learning and those schedules will be released. We are in the process of the completion of a parent/student handbook which will outline practices and procedures and will distribute that when we can add the details based on tonight's decision. We will distribute information through the avenues that we have used to date: our website, our Facebook page, and our PowerSchool email blasts. If you find you are not receiving information please contact the school to make sure that they have your updated contact information.

We have heard from many staff and realize that this is a stressful time for them. Childcare is a huge issue for our young teaching staff and we have worked to change our support day from Friday to Wednesday, as well as incorporating this mid-week planning time in order to better meet their needs. We are also working with Cape Elizabeth Community Services to try to provide opportunities for child-care coverage for children of our staff. In addition, we have worked to create opportunities for those staff who have high risk medical needs to teach remotely. We will continue to work with staff in order to meet their needs and make their back to school experience less stressful.

We realize that plans made now may need to change as we progress through this challenging year and we will make every effort to be flexible and to meet the needs of our students and families. We are counting on families to screen their students each day and to keep them home, should they display symptoms in order to protect our entire community. We are committed to providing a learning environment that is as safe as possible in this challenging pandemic and need the entire learning community home and school, to work together in this effort. We realize that as we re-open our schools, there may be bumps along the way, plans that need to be revised, traffic patterns in our hallways that may need to be changed, lunch and recess plans that need to be reworked, and we are committed to being flexible and changing to make things work as smoothly as possible. We have listened to staff and to the community and have tried the best we can to meet their needs. We ask for your continued support and patience as we work to provide an excellent education for our students during these difficult and challenging times.