

Friday, June 5, 2020

We had our second Parent Advisory Group meeting. We are posting all questions and answers on social media to keep everyone informed as our August school opening plan evolves.

We started with a general understanding that probably does not come as a surprise for most people familiar with schools, social distancing of 6 feet is going to be very challenging. We have a large student population and small classrooms.

We were fortunate to have Dr. Mindy Prewitt available to answer questions related to the COVID-19 virus and possible mitigation factors.

It is our intention to open school two days later than scheduled on Aug. 12, 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 online options for those students who may not be able to attend school.

The direction from the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) has been to prepare a hybrid model of online instruction and in classroom instruction in the event we are forced to close schools again due to COVID-19 outbreaks in the State of Mississippi. The exact words used were, "prepare for intermittent school closures."

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.

If you know of anyone interested in being a part of our Parent Advisory Group, please have them contact Modesty Shumpert at mhshumpert@tupeloschools.com.

Questions from The Parent Advisory Group

(Questions for Dr. Prewitt)

COVID-19 is spread through respiratory droplets. The droplets are what you cough or sneeze out into the air. The virus is also received that way. The other way to spread COVID-19 is through surfaces. The two best ways to mitigate COVID-19 spread is through hand hygiene and masking.

What does the antibody test help us understand?

(Dr. Prewitt)

The test will inform you if you have antibodies to the virus. The way antibodies work, you produce them several days after you become infected with the acute antibodies, versus two weeks after the infection, which is the longer lasting antibodies. If there's a positive antibody

test, that means you've been exposed to the virus. However, it doesn't indicate necessarily if you're infectious. The best way to do that is with a PTR test.

What is the latest on requiring students to wear masks or face shields and which is better for reducing the spread of COVID-19?

(Dr. Prewitt)

As of right now, we still haven't finalized a decision. Masks cover just the nose and mouth, while the shields cover the entire face. Both contribute greatly to lowering the risks of spreading germs. Coughing or sneezing into either of these reduces the chance of spreading the virus. Research shows those under the age of 2 should not wear either masks or shields, along with those who suffer from breathing issues, such as asthma, or those who are incapacitated. We know there will be an adjustment with either masks or face shields, but minimizing risks is our priority as parents and balancing risk factors, especially knowing there will be times when it's impossible to practice social distancing. You're going to have lowest risk if you don't congregate at all. You'll have less risk with proper hand hygiene and masking. You'll have higher risk if you do nothing.

Even with shields and mask, is it safe to start school in the fall?

(Dr. Prewitt)

CDC has levels of risk factors for schools. CDC breaks it down into low, more risk, and highest risk. The CDC says the lowest risk is virtual only classes and activities. More risk would include small activities and events where students and teachers stay together with each other throughout the day, and groups do not mix and students remain six feet apart and do not share objects, and wear face coverings when not able to achieve 6ft of social distancing. The highest risk would be full-size, in-person classes and events where students aren't spaced apart, they share classroom materials and supplies, and they mix between classes and activities.

How do you reduce mask shaming?

(Dr. Picou)

That is something we will have to address as a district? We will outline it in our discipline and expectations procedures.

Do the stats show school-age kids should wear masks?

(Dr. Prewitt)

I have not seen the stats on school age students wearing masks. The spread of the virus is a function of respiratory droplets. The purpose to wear face coverings is to protect each other from respiratory droplets and inadvertently carrying the virus home to caregivers, parents, grandparents.

How does touching the mask, taking them off to eat and doing other things affect the effectiveness of the mask?

(Dr. Prewitt)

Washing hands is super important, along with not letting others touch your mask. If they touch their own masks, then they need to wash their hands again.

Will administrators and teachers be tested for the Coronavirus?

(Picou)

We have hired a more extensive nurse team. The nurse team will develop a comprehensive medical plan. We are not planning on testing all administrators and teachers. We are also not planning on testing all students. (Dr. Prewitt) In the world of medicine, testing is great. You also have to go by symptom and keep track of that as well.

What about those parents who are adamant about their child not wearing masks?

(Dr. Prewitt)

In the health care environment, it is all or none. Either you do you don't. If you are trying to reduce the risk, it has to be a uniform, compliant situation. If one person is infected, that one person can potentially infect in clusters to those in prolonged exposure.

(Picou)

This is going to be a balancing act. We are right now trying to collect as much feedback as possible from the community. We are trying our best to come up with a plan that keeps everyone safe and allows us to open schools without an A/B schedule.

If you go to AB scheduling, would parents with multiple kids be able to send them on the same day?

(Picou)

Yes. We would figure out a way to accommodate working parents if that is the course that is taken.

What about children with food allergies?

(Picou)

We will follow a medical action plan regarding food allergies. Our school nurses would make sure those children are safe.

If a school has to shut down, how would you prepare?

(Picou)

We've been told by MDE to prepare for intermittent closures. It's going to be a challenge. If there is a case, we would have to close down the school for a period of time while it is thoroughly cleaned and disinfected. That means we are looking at the possibility of closing and re-opening throughout the school year. That isn't going to help parents, and that's our biggest fear. Our goal is that we are able to stay open all year long and have a great graduation ceremony.

Will there be restrictions on backpacks? Can kids bring a purse or smaller bag to keep up with their personal items?

They may bring a purse. Elementary schools will have a supply box purchased by the school to keep all their supplies at the school. We are trying to set it up so students have what they need at home and at school, so there is less of a need to carry items from home to school. At this time, there will be no restrictions on backpacks.

Are there any concerns about cleaning chemicals?

The chemicals we use will be the same ones we use now, and they are approved by the CDC. We will follow strict guidelines regarding cleaning. The chemicals we use have been vetted for kids with health issues.

Will kids be able to interact with kids from other classrooms?

We will probably have to limit movement in hallways as much as possible. Principals are currently working on schedules that keep students in smaller cohorts. There will be limited interactions in common areas at the school to limit the chance to spread germs.

When will Chromebooks come home?

Elementary students will only use their Chromebooks at home in the event schools have to be closed. They will not be shared. Secondary students will take Chromebooks home every day and return with Chromebooks every morning to be used in class. Elementary students will keep Chromebooks at school and then take them home if there is a school closure.

Will traditional homework continue for lower elementary grades?

Yes. Work and assignments will be submitted through CANVAS to limit the spread of germs. We will provide workbooks for children to have at home. We will also have online training this summer for parents to learn CANVAS.

Will students be allowed to bring water bottles from home, and will water bottles be provided for those who don't have any?

Yes. Students will be allowed to bring water bottles from home and the schools will provide for those who don't have one. Students will take them home and clean them. The ones we provide at breakfast and lunch will be disposable and they will be recycled.

What arrangements will be made for arrival and dismissal times to be able to practice distance learning?

We will stagger times for drop off and pick up and buses will be our biggest challenge. Social distancing with 45 students on a bus will be challenging. We will do our very best to stagger our times so we aren't letting all our students out at one time.

Will there be one drop off and pick-up location at each school with temperature checks?

We are still evaluating temperature screening at the door and how and if that will work logistically. We are also running that through our legal team and still working on how we can implement this within legal parameters. We are going to have to examine entry ways at all schools and figure out the safest ways for students to arrive and leave.

Can students bring their own lunch?

Yes.

A modified year-round calendar for community discussion.

We cannot do a modified calendar for this year. There is not enough time to prepare and engage the community in the discussion. For this year, I'm proposing to start school on Aug. 12 instead of Aug 10 to give teachers and administrators extra time to prepare. It was originally Aug. 10. It doesn't change anything for anybody except that we will start school two days later.

Will middle college students return for 4th block at the high school?

At this point, we don't know what ICC's schedule is, so we will have to wait and see.

Will students have to stay in their classes all day? That will be difficult for some grade levels.

We have to be conscious of that. Students staying in the same class all day long will be challenging. There will be brain breaks built in. Students will be able to go outside in small groups. We won't lock them inside all day. We will manage groups in a way to keep them from congregating in large numbers.

How will sports and band be able to participate?

Great question. Big challenge is how to do it safely. We love our activities. We will follow MHSAA rules and guidance. We have to find a way to have sports and band while keeping students and staff safe.

What about parents who send their children to school sick?

Our school nurse team will establish a handbook of protocols. Parents will have to be very careful about sending their children to school with an elevated fever or when sick. Our nurses will be very vigilant and will send those students home. We simply can't risk a wider infection rate from students who really should be home when sick. We will have an isolation room in every school. Strict sick student protocols are necessary for the safety of our students and staff and to keep our schools open all year.

With new Distance learning software, will teachers be live at specific times or will there just be YouTube videos?

We are working on that plan. Biggest challenge is figuring out which students will stay home and use online services and which ones are going to attend school. Online education will be greatly enhanced in the fall. Distance learning will be time specific, organized and structured.

Attendance will be required. It will be more structured and more rigorous and more challenging for our students.

Can it be half and half with regular school and home schooling?

Right now, we are trying to develop a plan that accommodates students for an entire school day. We are open to providing as much flexibility and as many options as we can for parents and students.

Will we still have art and music?

We are committed to continuing art and music programs, but we may have to include precautions just like we will include precautions in sports programs. Our team is working through those precautions. We will do our best to keep school exciting for students while maintaining safety precautions.

Will there still be volunteers allowed in the building?

We will have to limit the number of adults coming in and out of the building. Volunteers can still help virtually, but until we get a good handle on this virus, we will have to limit access. Schools simply cannot be as open as they were because one infected person coming from the outside could end up forcing a school closure.

We may have missed some questions. We did our best to capture the conversation. I hope this helps parents understand a little about some of the issues that will impact the open of school in August. We will have our next meeting 12:10 p.m. on Thursday, June 11.

Thank You.