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Henry County Schools Shares Return Plans, Dates for Students

Board agrees to four-week phase-in plan for those families choosing on-campus learning

HENRY COUNTY, GA – One week removed from their discussion about a framework to bring students back to campus and a look at local COVID-19 health data update, Henry County Board of Education members met on Monday, August 31 and agreed to dates for a phased-in gradual return process for those families choosing on-campus learning for their children.

The approaching return to campus opportunity for families is part of a hybrid model of instructional delivery the district was prepared to provide before board members voted to delay the start of school and start all students in a remote environment. The decision made by the board on July 17 was out of an abundance of caution based on the large spike of new COVID-19 cases locally during that time. Recent improvement in the current health data has opened the door for families who feel ready to send their children back to school buildings.

“We planned for two different scenarios from the start,” said Superintendent Mary Elizabeth Davis. “Our scenario one did include the hybrid model of allowing families to choose either on-campus or remote learning for their child, but scenario two was a full remote start for all students based on the instance of unfavorable health metrics or government orders. The health metrics dictated that move back in July, but improving health metrics are allowing us to responsibly consider going back to the hybrid model.”

Numbers publicized at the August 24 special called meeting of the board revealed that the trends for Henry County are positive in that the rolling 14-day daily average of new positive COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents has been steadily declining over the past month. Of the new cases that have been confirmed in the last week alone, those numbers represent only 0.14 percent of the county’s population. Those numbers one week later have declined even further. Numbers now show that there is a daily average of only 16 new positive COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents representing 0.12 percent of a population of 239,866 residents.

Davis noted that these health metrics are available on the district website for public consumption so families can see the numbers that drive the decisions in a transparent measure. Numbers reviewed and checked weekly include the new positive cases in Henry County over a 14-day period, a daily average of those new cases, the hospitalization rate, and the transmission rate of cases per school. Combined with extensive internal and external stakeholder feedback, district officials continue to study districts across the state that have allowed the return-to-campus option combined with ongoing rigorous preparation.

The preparations that were completed ahead of the originally designated start date remain and some have been able to be enhanced for the time when families could choose to send kids back or keep them learning remotely.

All preparation efforts are contained in the district’s Return-to-Campus playbook and include a focus on facilities, transportation, training, piloting of gradual and staggered returns, and a COVID-19 positive-case protocol for all schools and district operations.

With requirements being met, board members revisited the proposed staggered, gradual return phases that were broached during the meeting held on August 24. The difference this time around is that target dates were added to the phases.

The gradual transition phases and dates approved by board members are as follows:

- **Phase 1** – *September 14* – Remaining school-based employees return; all families would confirm their preferred learning option. **Employees will be able to consult with HR officials regarding specific employee work restrictions.
- **Phase 2** – *September 28* – Student Orientation (scheduled alphabetically by last name) for acclimation to processes, protocols, and on-campus learning responsibilities. Students (Pre-K–12) with a last name starting with letters A through M, will go on Monday and Tuesday. Students (Pre-K–12) with a last name starting with letters N through Z, will go on Thursday and Friday. Pre-K-12 students served in self-contained programs will return to campus Monday through Friday and continue with this through the remaining phases.
- **Phase 3** – *October 5* – Student Return Enacted by Choice – Elementary and middle school students will return Monday-Friday, while high school students will remain on a split schedule.
- **Phase 4** – *TBD* – Students at all levels, if a return-to-campus option is selected, will be on campus Monday-Friday.

Communication to families regarding the selection window will be sent directly to all HCS families via Infinite Campus Messenger. They will be able to visit the district or their school's website to find the link that will take them through the learning option selection process. The window to confirm the option that is best for a family will be August 31 – September 9.

For those students returning to campus, masks are required on HCS buses and campuses. Exceptions may apply for a student's special circumstances, and mask-down zones may be determined at a local school. Masks also need to comply with dress code standards.

With the opening of campuses for students, the board will also be taking safety measures to re-open their meetings to in-person participation via advanced registration and teleconference during Phase 1 of the plan. More details will soon be shared regarding this process.

The decision to reintroduce the hybrid model was carefully considered by the board and district leaders, and in the end, the combination of improving health metrics, gradually welcoming students back, and the extensive preparation performed across the district gives confidence to the plans.

"The mitigating efforts that have been taken by our schools and community to provide a safe environment for students and staff have been extraordinary," said Davis. "From our support to practice good hygiene and practice social distancing, to our preparations at all facilities in our school district, we are ready to welcome kids back. We know what our procedures and response will be in the event someone in our schools is confirmed with a COVID-19 case, and we have communicated and remain committed to keeping parents informed of all pertinent information with the greatest of care."

For more information on Henry County Schools, visit www.henry.k12.ga.us.

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