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Board of Education Discusses Return-to-Campus Options

Officials closely examining local health data in preparation for possible return to campus for students

HENRY COUNTY, GA – Recent trends in COVID-19 cases in Henry County have led to district officials and Henry County Board of Education members feeling optimistic about the opportunity to gradually welcome students back to campus soon with a staggered return.

Superintendent Mary Elizabeth Davis provided board members with a glimpse into local health data and a running dashboard that will reside on the district's website and provide viewers with a weekly snapshot of COVID-19 numbers in the county. The dashboard is populated with information obtained from the department of public health.

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 average of positive 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.

"We want to make sure that all stakeholders are able to see and gauge this data along with the data tracker here in our school district," said Davis. "This is an important effort to be completely transparent about how COVID-19 reveals itself throughout our schools. However, returning to campus requires more than just the numbers changing for the better."

The numbers improving is the first requirement in an approach that takes into account four total requirements for allowing students to return to campus. 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.

District officials were well underway to opening schools back up in a hybrid model for those students who selected to return to campus. Spiking numbers of COVID-19 cases in mid-July moved the board to make the decision to delay the start of school and go full-virtual to start the year. The preparations that were completed ahead of the originally designated start date remain and some have been enhanced for the time designated for students to be able to return.

All 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.

To help schools open in a hybrid model of choice for families, district officials are pushing forth with a community campaign known as Keep Henry Healthy. The campaign focuses on all community members staying well through regular good hygiene practices, wearing a mask, continuously monitoring your health, and responsible reporting of any known COVID-19 cases or contact with those having a positive case or symptoms.

In partnering as a community around this campaign, this will help our health metrics and allow for a sooner rather than later transition to a hybrid learning model of choice for families.

The gradual transition phases identified include:

- Phase 1 – 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 – Student Orientation (scheduled alphabetically by last name) for acclimation to processes, protocols, and on-campus learning responsibilities.
- Phase 3 – Student Return Enacted by Choice – Elementary and middle school students would return Monday-Friday, while high school students would remain on a staggered return.
- Phase 4 – Students at all levels, if a return-to-campus option is selected, will be on campus Monday-Friday.

“This news is exciting to hear,” said Board Vice-Chair Holly Cobb. “We all want students to return to campus but we want to do this the right way, and the details shared today give us hope that the opportunity to return to campus, for those families wanting to do so, is not far away.”

Board member Annette Edwards noted her appreciation for the documents and plans prepared for the community.

“Both of the documents – the playbook and back-to-school 2020-21 information – are well thought out and well planned,” said Edwards. “I hope our staff and community can appreciate the hard work that has gone into planning for going back to school face-to-face. There is nothing more important than face-to-face learning. It is important that we bring our students and staff back in a safe environment.”

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

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