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KEYS SCHOOLS DRAFTING FLEXIBLE PLAN FOR UNCERTAIN TIMES

MONROE COUNTY, Fla. – Uncertain times call for a nimble and flexible response and that is what the Monroe County School District is planning for this fall. In a draft plan titled “Guidebook for reopening schools”, incoming Superintendent Theresa Axford says a broad group with representatives from the school district, the health department and members of the community have come up with a plan to serve Keys kids in three different scenarios: minimal exposure in the community, moderate exposure and substantial exposure.

“None of us can accurately predict what will happen with the Covid-19 virus between now and the opening of school in August,” she said. “But we have to be ready to go anyway. So, we convened a large group to look at how we will respond to each possible iteration. And by doing this as early as possible, we are able to communicate this to the rest of those affected so they can, in turn, make appropriate plans.” Axford, who will become superintendent in July, has served as the Executive Director of Teaching and Learning for the past eight years. She joined the district in 1986 as a classroom teacher.

“I know how disruptive it is for families, particularly those with small children, when schools are closed for extensive time periods,” Axford said. “During times of substantial community exposure, however, closures may be necessary.”

Her other main concern: making sure all kids regardless of their individual circumstances, receive the best education possible to prepare them for their future.

“What we did was look at all of the ways we can safely keep as many kids in school for as many days as possible under all of the different phases of exposure. This is the best way we can serve the community and the kids,” Axford said. After that, the planning group looked at how the district can best provide a virtual education to all grade levels of students and still be able to deliver the same exemplary level of instruction that district families are accustomed to receiving.

Going into the school year, the level at which schools can reopen will be determined by both the school superintendent and the local office of the Florida Department of Health. The decision will take into consideration Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines as well as state and local regulations, laws and recommendations.

Regardless of the level of exposure in the community, the district will be doing a number of things to reinforce safety and health. And no matter what phase of exposure the community is in, virtual learning will be available to all families and students who need or want to remain at home due to health concerns.

Some of the safety measures which are already in place and will remain so:

- Mask-wearing will be required at all times when social distancing is not possible. This would include on buses, when walking between classes, and at any meetings or events which don't allow for adequate space between people.
- Classrooms will be provided with adequate amounts of cleaning supplies such as soap, hand sanitizer, gloves and cleansing agents for surface cleaning. Students and staff will be instructed in how to adequately clean both themselves and the classroom.
- Cleaning staff will receive training on how to best clean school buildings, buses and playground equipment and normal cleaning routines will be substantially increased to ensure safety.
- Classrooms will be rearranged to provide for more space between students. Students will sit facing forward instead of facing toward one another. Schools will be identifying extra rooms which can be used for instruction to ensure that social distancing of students is possible.
- Signs will be posted school-wide to remind people of safety and cleanliness guidelines. There will also be markings on floors where necessary to remind people about social distancing.
- Visitors to schools will be limited and will be required to wear face masks; points of entry into schools will be restricted and office staff will be protected by plexiglass shields.
- Each school will review its cafeteria operations and determine how best to organize mealtimes safely. The plan outlines a number of possibilities depending on the school, including staggering mealtimes and feeding students in their classrooms.

Guidelines during Minimal Community Exposure

Minimal exposure in the community is defined as isolated cases with limited community transmission and case investigations with no evidence of exposure in large community settings.

Under these circumstances, all students would return to school except those whose parents choose to keep them enrolled in a virtual environment at home.

The plan for this phase provides schools with guidance on how to do this safely. Some considerations include:

- Teaching smaller groups of students to ensure social distancing, which will require identifying additional classroom space and instructional staff.
- Grouping students in "cohorts" which would stay together for various activities during the school day. The use of these smaller "cohort" groups would limit any potential virus exposure which might happen within schools.
- Developing schedules which allow for the minimal amount of student movement, and safe movement of students when necessary. This will include changes in cafeteria schedules and operations if necessary for safety.

Guidelines for Moderate Community Exposure

This phase is defined as "sustained transmission with likelihood or confirmed exposure and potential for rapid increase in cases.

In this phase of exposure, students in Pre-K through Grade 5 will attend face-to-face instruction every day. Class sizes will be reduced and may require schedule adjustments to ensure CDC guidelines are being followed. Grades 6-12 will use a schedule of alternating days to reduce numbers. These students will attend school every other day on a staggered schedule and will have virtual school on the alternating days.

All of the social distancing and cleanliness concerns of the previous phase will remain in place and in some circumstances will be more stringent. In this phase, meal service may be substantially changed to include students eating in the classroom instead of the cafeteria to reduce movement around the school and to enforce social distancing guidelines. Schools may also consider canceling extracurricular activities and events.

Guidelines for Substantial Exposure

This phase is defined by large-scale community transmission.

In this phase, schools will be closed with students self-isolating, attending full time virtual school. Meal service will continue. Cafeteria staff will prepare meals and transportation staff will deliver them to centralized locations throughout the Keys where families can pick them up.

The focus is on the kids no matter what

Regardless of the phase, schools will remain focused on doing what is best for students and their families. Each school will pay close attention to making sure all students have the necessary equipment to remain connected to their virtual classrooms. And staff will also focus on providing other mental and physical health and wellness assistance that may be required.

“This is new for all of us,” said Axford. “We will all have to be as flexible as possible while keeping in mind our main goals: keeping our kids safe, and providing them with the best education under difficult circumstances. With that in mind, we are also putting in place a communications plan so we can keep everyone informed. We need everyone concerned to stay informed for all of this to work and we will do our best to provide up to date information in as many formats and locations as possible.”

Communication

Informational press releases will be issued on a regular basis through local media. In addition, information will be available on the school district website, keysschools.com and on all school social media pages. There are social media links on the district website, or you can find the pages directly: on Facebook @mymcsd; on Twitter @keysschools; on Instagram at mymcsd. For those who are not able to monitor internet resources, a phone number will be set up prior to the start of the school year with staff available during working hours to give updates and answer questions. For emergency information, the district will use the automated phone messaging system to push out messages to affected parents.