

# Port Townsend School District details final reopening plans

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Open says we — sort of.

It's a little more complicated than that.

Actually, it's a lot more complicated, as attendees of last week's Port Townsend School District Board of Directors special meeting learned.

The board and other district officials met via Zoom before a virtual crowd of about 40, including Dr. Tom Locke, Public Health Officer for Jefferson County, to outline the updated version of the district's reopening plan for all four schools, "Version 2.0," as it was called, Thursday, Aug. 13.

Initially released Aug. 10, a completed version is slated for approval at the Aug. 20 board meeting.

The plan, officials said, will obviously continue to be revised as the science regarding the virus develops and state and local directives require changes.

Carrie Ehrhardt, principal of Port Townsend High School, where the reopening plan is perhaps most complicated due to both the age and number of students there, said things had changed much from where they'd stood back in June.

"We've already had to pivot a little bit due to the progression of the virus over the summer," she said.

Ultimately, the goal of the now-established plan, Ehrhardt explained, was to give every student as much direct interaction with each other and their teachers as was safety possible.

"Our goal is to provide instruction for all students," she said, "but we're using our equity lens to target out most vulnerable and our most at-risk students ... It was challenging because we were feeling that in this situation, really, all of our high school students could be considered at risk."

In summary, the available learning models — "blended" being a mix of in-person and online or "distance" learning, and "distance learning" meaning exclusively virtual-based education — for each district institution are:

Port Townsend High School: Most students will participate in distance learning with up to 125 students, selected by need and expressed family choice, allowed a blended learning option which allots twice weekly in-person sessions;

Blue Heron Middle School and Salish Coast Elementary: Most students will participate in blended learning, physically attending classes twice a week during either Monday/Thursday or Tuesday/Friday sessions, with exclusively distance learning available by family choice; and

OCEAN: The district's alternative learning program will be 100 percent distance learning-based.

Recent guidelines released by Gov. Jay Inslee advises — but does not mandate — restricting or canceling in-person education and extracurricular activities, including sports and artistic/performative endeavors, in both public and private schools in nearly every county in Washington based on individual areas' current levels of transmission of the novel coronavirus.

However, Jefferson County, despite a continued slight increase in cases, is one of only five counties in the state considered “low risk,” having logged less than 25 cases per 100,000 in a recent two-week period.

For such areas specifically, the state recommends respective schools teach elementary schoolers in person and consider a hybrid model for older students, one which incorporates a blend of in-person and remote instruction.

Additional changes this year will include the omission of “F” as a potential grade, with students who perform unsatisfactorily in a given course earning an “Incomplete” instead.

Director of Special Services Shelby MacMeekin discussed the new, updated health and safety requirements for in-person education.

“We will be requiring all staff and all students to wear cloth face coverings,” MacMeekin explained. “We know that there is very tiny percent of students that will not be able to [wear them], for instance we know preschool students cannot wear a mask. But in situations like that we will take special consideration and make sure we have extra safety precautions in place, such as additional PPE and protocols in order to address those very specific situations.”

Masks will also be required while riding a school bus, MacMeekin said, and any student who forgets or loses their mask will be provided one.

Students will obviously not be required to wear masks at lunch, MacMeekin said, but the district has “very specific plans that the schools will share ... for students to remain in their cohorts and have lunch in their classroom or in a secure area.”

“Cohorts” is the term the district has applied to groups of students in class together. Continued physical distancing, designated entrance points, and clearly marked traffic patterns in hallways will be utilized to further promote health and safety.

Additionally, schools will perform temperature checks with contactless thermometers as students and staff enter the facility.

Students found to be exhibiting symptoms will be isolated, MacMeekin said.

“If somebody comes in and they are symptomatic or we suspect that they may have COVID, we will quarantine them,” she explained. “They will be in well ventilated rooms and students in quarantine will wear a mask and all staff will remain 6 feet away. We will also have special protocols in place for PPE in those quarantine areas and we will contact families right away and let them know to come and bring their child home.”

It is something of a gift, officials agreed, for JeffCo schools to be allowed to open at all, and they praised the larger community for having “stepped up” in terms of following governmental recommendations and containing the spread of the disease.

Such diligence will remain crucial, according to Locke, if parents and students wish schools to continue to expand in-person activity.

“The point I would make to parents is what they do in the home and on weekends and outside of school, it’s not just going to be an important factor in whether the schools stay open or not — it’s really going to be the decisive factor,” he said.

The primary determinant of whether outbreaks will occur in school are outside of the control of school officials, Locke added.

“The school is a relatively controlled environment compared to everything else,” he said.