

What does fall hold for our local schools?

I was struck by a comment that I recently heard renowned author and speaker John Maxwell make when discussing leadership during these turbulent times. Among the many pearls of wisdom offered, the one that resonated most was when he stated, “it’s okay to be uncertain, but it’s not okay for leaders to be unclear.” In the spirit of clarity, let me take this opportunity to share with you what we do know and anticipate learning related to COVID-19 and reopening our schools this fall. All decisions will be based on our district’s unwavering commitment to our students, parents, faculty and community.

Let me begin by stating I remain deeply hopeful we will be able to resume some level of traditional schooling in the fall in a safe and responsible manner. While I could not be more proud of our staff, students and families who have rallied around our distance learning program, grab and go meal services, and critical childcare, our current model is not without its challenges. The impact campus closures is having on families, the mental health of students, the loss of so many valuable experiences and the ability to deliver and ensure robust learning for all is deeply challenging in a distance learning format. While we certainly understand the circumstances that led to mandatory school closures in March, our public education system is framed by our inherent human nature; it longs for the social interaction and engagement that is best nurtured in classrooms, on stages and on fields and courts.

What we do know? As a result of the incredible sacrifices from so many community members and businesses, our skilled local health care professionals, and outstanding leadership from County Health Director Meghan DeBolt and her staff, Walla Walla has successfully transitioned into Phase 2 reopening of Governor Inslee’s Safe Start Plan. I remain hopeful Phase 3 approval will be forthcoming. These are both monumental steps for our community as we seek to recover from the incredible economic devastation and social impacts these restrictions have asked from all of us.

What do we anticipate? While the Governor’s phased approach helps coordinate the reopening of our businesses along main street, and we are hopeful this will influence school reopening options available to us come September, the decision around fall school reopening options rest outside of the current 4-phased Safe Start program. The Governor’s Office and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) have begun working on possible school reopening plans. We have been informed we’ll receive preliminary guidance around possible fall school reopening scenarios as early as mid-June. Additionally, as conditions surrounding the virus progress over the summer months, we anticipate further direction from the Governor’s Office and the Washington State Department of Health will also influence options available to us in September. Based on these timelines, we expect it will be many weeks before clear guidance is provided by state officials on fall reopening possibilities.

What is our commitment? Rather than waiting until mid-to-late summer to initiate planning efforts when final direction is likely to be received, Walla Walla Public Schools believes it is critical to begin planning, research and outreach now. These early efforts will ensure ample opportunity for stakeholder engagement and allows us to model and troubleshoot potential fall scenarios well in advance. By starting now we will also be able to provide sufficient time to plan around equity and social-emotional supports for students and expedite our ability to finalize and communicate our fall educational plans with students and parents once firm guidance is received.

We have developed a timeline of activities and milestones that support our commitment to internal staff and external stakeholder involvement throughout the planning process. Preliminary feedback

surveys have already been administered where thousands of respondents, from students, parents and stakeholders, have already provided critical feedback for School Board and district officials. Additionally, dozens of staff and community agency representatives are currently analyzing various reopening possibilities so that we are prepared to respond locally to whatever state guidance is ultimately received. Finally, communication plans and further input will be sought as we continue to seek and refine plans prior to implementation. This information can be found on our Fall Planning webpage here: [www.wwps.org/distancelearning/reopening](http://www.wwps.org/distancelearning/reopening)

I hope this correspondence has helped affirm Maxwell's guidance. Although we are uncertain at this time exactly what fall will look like for our nearly 6,000 students, 800 staff and over 10,000 parents, I hope this message articulates the clarity by which we are planning and communicating around this important issue. On behalf of our district, I want to thank our entire community for their support, patience and commitment as we work together on our plans to safely reopen school campuses. Regardless of the circumstances we may find ourselves in the fall, trust my colleagues and I remain committed in supporting students and families as we strive towards our vision of Developing Washington's Most Sought-After Graduates.