

COVID-19 Update/2020-2021 School Year Status - Work Session

Dr. Michael J. Martirano, Superintendent

Date: Tuesday, December 22, 2020



Board members, I want to start our work session by sharing updates regarding online learning, distribution of student technology and meals.

Online learning

- During the week of December 14th, over 99% of our students took part in one or more application activities, which include Google Meet sessions or learning activities on Canvas, DreamBox, or Lexia Core. By level, this represents:
 - For elementary students: 99.1% for Kindergarten and 99.3% for Grades 1-5
 - 99.4% for Middle school students
 - 98.5% for High school students
- During this same period, nearly 97% of students were marked as present for student attendance. By level, this includes:
 - For elementary students: 96.2% for Kindergarten and 96.9% for Grades 1-5
 - 97.6% for Middle school students
 - 96.5% for High school students
- We continue to work toward achieving 1:1 student-device ratio by the end of this school year, to ensure all students have the necessary technology for online learning. The status of device distribution is as follows:
 - Device distribution to schools is complete at the elementary level, with over 24,000 students and families having picked up a device, representing nearly 98% of elementary students.
 - At the middle school level, over 8,100 devices have been distributed to students, representing over 59% of students.
 - At the high school level, over 6,500 devices have been distributed to students, representing over 36% of students.
 - Device distribution will continue as rapidly as possible, subject to the availability of devices from our vendors.

- We have also provided 730 hotspots and 660 Internet Essentials vouchers to schools for distribution to their families who need support in acquiring internet access, in an effort supported by the Bright Minds Foundation.

Meals

- School meal services ensure students have access to the nutrition that is essential to learning and well-being. Grab-and-go meals are provided free to any student, and any child under age 18, through the end of the 2020-2021 school year, subject to USDA funding availability.
- Last week, we served almost 95,000 free meals. Since Fall meal service began in September, we have served over 1.85 million meals. We have served nearly 3.3 million free grab-and-go meals since schools were closed due to the pandemic in March.
- Families may pick up meals in advance to cover the winter break. Details about meal service and schedule adjustments during the winter break period have been shared with all families through our HCPSS News weekly emails, and are provided on our website.

Now I will share some information on several important topics.

Enrollment Decline

- Like many other public school districts, this year our system has experienced an unanticipated enrollment decline of approximately 1,230 K-12 students from last school year. Our actual enrollment for this year is 56,279 students – which is about 1,800 students below what we had projected last year.
- The most significant declines reflect a transfer to homeschooling or private schools, which we believe reflect the difficulties inherent to virtual instruction for families. We anticipate that many of these students will return to our schools once school buildings reopen for all students.
- As you know, Maintenance of Effort (MOE) funding formulas are calculated using current-year K-12 enrollment, so the enrollment decline has significant implications for our funding for Fiscal Year 2022. If no actions are taken by the state to adjust MOE formulas, our revenues from the state and county could decline by more than \$32 million for the upcoming school year.
- Our system is joining in calls from across the state to hold school districts harmless from circumstances that are a temporary aberration. We must have sufficient funding to

serve both returning and new students next year. Funding cannot decline at the very moment when we hope to be back to normal in FY 2022.

Quarter 1 Student Achievement

- Our recent analysis of student achievement for the 1st quarter of the current school year compared to the same period last year provides a window into how students are faring during virtual learning. The data shows distinct differences at each level:
 - At the high school level, the percentage of students with one or more D's or E's in Q1 improved by 4 percentage points, from 24% last year to 20% this year.
 - For middle school, 22% of students received at least one D or E in Quarter 1 this year compared to 20% among their peers last year – a two percentage-point increase. Grade 6 had the highest percentage of students with D's/E's and the largest increase from last year to this year.
 - At the elementary level, teachers were instructed to give grades of A, B, and C to students who were participating in instruction, so rather than letter grades, the data reflects students meeting expected fall-to-fall growth on reading and math MAP assessments.
 - In reading, the percentage of test takers meeting their projected fall-to-fall growth decreased by 9 percentage points, from about 56% last year to 47% this year.
 - The percentage of test takers meeting fall-to-fall growth projections in math also declined, from 54% in SY19-20 to 36% in SY20-21, a decrease of 18 percentage points.
- Among specific student groups, English Learners at all levels experienced declines. We are also observing a general correlation between 1st quarter performance trends and student attendance.
- It is important to note that exact comparisons are not possible, due to this year's 4x4 schedule at the secondary level, and because elementary level MAP data reflects only those students who participated in MAP in two consecutive fall administrations. Despite these qualifiers, the comparison provides valuable insight into the impact of virtual instruction on student learning.
- We are providing professional learning for school administrators and teachers on strategies to support academic achievement during this challenging time, through

approaches that include grading practices; additional supports for administrators to work with teachers; more intervention opportunities, especially for English Learners; and greater consistency with assignments.

- We are also working toward providing additional learning recovery opportunities during the summer.

Student Feedback on 1st Semester

- I want to share information recently shared by our students regarding virtual instruction. Thousands of students provided feedback through several platforms.
 - More than 3,000 HCPSS students so far have signed an online petition regarding student workloads.
 - Over 280 students in Grades 6-12 have completed a detailed survey on student workloads shared by the Student Board Member Zack Koung.
 - Many students shared feedback during the November Howard County Association of Student Council (HCASC) meeting.
- Common themes emerged, with students sharing frustration over workloads that often exceeded the expected 3–4 hours per week per class period described in the reopening plan.
- We are working with school administrators on appropriate strategies for staff in assigning and grading student work, and teachers will receive professional development in this area.
- Our guiding principle for this school year continues to be that all instruction should utilize assignments and assessments that truly focus on mastery achievement and do not burden staff or students with an overwhelming workload.

Graduations and Senior Year Celebrations

- The senior year is a major milestone in every student's experience, and should always be marked with many special moments and celebrations. We are excited to share with you some of the activities taking place and being planned to celebrate the Class of 2021.
- Planning is underway among central office staff, high school administrators and senior class representatives and advisors for ways to hold many traditional senior activities such as prom, senior awards, and graduation while implementing new class activities during this virtual period. Senior class pictures are nearing completion and schools will

soon begin graduation cap and gown orders. Many schools are already holding senior class activities such as trivia nights and class meetings.

- A school system Prom Venue Committee, composed of high school administrators and central office personnel, is researching venues that offer both indoor and outdoor spaces so that senior class boards can begin planning this annual tradition. It is our hope to hold as many of these celebrations in person as possible.
- Finally, we have reached out to Merriweather Post Pavilion to initiate planning our traditional graduation ceremonies while also preparing contingency plans that might be needed depending on the health metrics at the time.
- While the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic means our plans for celebrating this year's graduating class must stay flexible, we are firmly committed to making this year a wonderful experience for our seniors.

Bridge to Normalized Instruction

- We continue to plan for an eventual return to a normalized instructional model. I want to make some preliminary remarks before I turn this over to staff to take the Board through our presentation.
- To recap the major steps that have occurred to date:
 - On October 22 of this year, the Board adopted the health metrics that would indicate when students and staff could safely begin to return to school buildings. We review these metrics daily and will continue using them to guide decisions on reinstating small groups and an eventual return to normalized instruction.
 - On November 16, the Board voted that the school system would remain in a virtual instructional model through the third academic quarter, which ends April 14, 2021, and that we will continue expanding and enhancing in-person small group program offerings with consideration for staff preferences.
 - This fall we have had a number of small group offerings operating in schools at locations having sufficient staff availability. Although we recently had to suspend in-person programs at least through winter break, due to the rise in COVID-19 cases in the community, the programs that we phased in beginning on September 26 include School-Based Learning Centers at 24 schools, special education services for students with most severe needs, the teen parenting program, and seven ARL-based CTE Career Academies for senior class participants. We will resume programs after the winter break as soon as health metrics allow, and staff

has planned for expanding the in-person support options to serve students at every school, and possibly at regional support centers, depending on staff availability. We will also resume in-person high school athletics on January 11 as long as health metrics allow.

- Finally, I continue to meet regularly with County Executive Ball and Dr. Rossman, the Howard County Health Officer, to discuss issues related to the pandemic including plans to disseminate the vaccine, and our Board Chair and Vice Chair also participate in those meetings.
- During this pandemic, the Board and I have navigated many challenges to best serve our students, staff, and families. We have been very thoughtful and deliberate in our decision making, and I have brought all major decisions regarding the systemic instructional model to the Board for consideration and approval.
- I will continue to maximize and build on the small group supports that we provide to students within the parameters of the November 16 Board decision that I referenced previously, and which states, *“Move to remain virtual for quarter three and continue on with enhancements and expansion of student groups and considering staff preferences.”* I also want to stress that *any* decision-making path requires that we use the health metrics approved by the Board to guide our decisions.
- Let me be very clear in stating that my goal is to make small groups available to support students from every school, and to examine the possibilities of additional small group opportunities within the grade bands of Pre-k through grade 2, based on Covid transmission data of the youngest learners. Staff are actively moving towards making these opportunities available to more students during January, February and March while honoring the wishes of families who wish for their child to remain virtual during this time.
- We will work collaboratively with our Human Resources office, school administrators, and bargaining units to request additional volunteers to maximize program delivery. I’m optimistic that when we turn the page on a more hopeful new year, and given the advance of a vaccine and the successes we’ve seen at schools where programs were already underway, that we will soon be in a different place than we were a few months ago in the level of staff interest in participation. I commend staff members who were supporting the small group programs before they were suspended. You were making a tremendous difference for the students you were serving.

- Additionally, I am seeking every possible avenue for students to return to opportunities including athletics, extracurricular activities, graduations, proms, and end-of-year celebrations - all to occur in-person. Staff are in the process of making plans to make this a reality.
- Today we will ask for the Board's priorities as we prepare to move the school system from virtual instructional to a normalized instructional model. These priorities will inform staff planning throughout this process, in preparation for a possible shift in the instructional model for the fourth quarter.
- Our presentation today will take the Board through the decision-making timeline, and we will identify each of the steps that must be made in preparation for that shift, including family and staff commitments, preparation of bus routes and buildings, verification of classroom capacities, and staff professional development.
- It is important to note that approximately 7 weeks are needed between a decision by the Board to shift to a new systemic instructional model, and the first date that the new model goes into effect to truly customize the development of a plan that serves students, families and staff and fulfills the objectives of the Board.
- Today's work session is just one in an ongoing series of discussions in preparation for the Board's decisions.
 - During our work sessions in January, we will continue our discussion on the Board's priorities.
 - In February, we will ask for the Board's decision regarding 4th quarter instruction.
 - In March, our discussion will center on finalizing the logistics for implementing the 4th quarter instructional model.
- Meanwhile, as I noted, staff is continuing to plan for more diverse and widely available in-person opportunities to serve more students during January, February, and March, once health metrics allow these programs to resume. We are continuing to bridge to a normalized instructional delivery model while also considering expanded summer programming possibilities.
- I will now turn over to Mr. Scott Ruehl, Director of Leadership Development, who will start off the Board's discussion.