

COVID-19 Work Session Remarks

Dr. Michael J. Martirano, Superintendent

Date: Monday, January 25, 2021



- Good afternoon, Board members. Today we will continue the discussion that we began last Thursday following the announcement by Governor Larry Hogan and State Superintendent Dr. Karen Salmon that school districts would be mandated to open in a hybrid format by March 1, 2021.
- Before I turn it over to staff to detail the proposed hybrid model and engage the Board in conversation, I would like to help the Board frame today's discussion by providing information - as we know it at this time - and provide a degree of coherence to an amorphous amount of shifting information, as well as a response to the themes of information conveyed to me over the weekend from members of our school system community.

Understanding the State's Authority

- Although the Governor fully supports the reopening of schools and has communicated that, he stated in his email on 1/23/21:
 - "By law, these decisions to reopen schools ultimately rest with the duly elected and appointed county school boards. But I want to be perfectly clear: I will do everything I possibly can to give all of our children the chance to get back into the classrooms."
- However, in Thursday's press conference, the State Superintendent stated, and I quote, *"In conjunction with the announcements from the Governor and Dr. Chan today, local school systems SHALL plan immediately for the return of students for in-person instruction by no later than March 1st."*
- In this statement, the word SHALL is used which is viewed as a directive from the State Superintendent. In consultation with General Counsel, the Maryland Educational Code provides broad authority to the State Superintendent, and in reading the code, it is believed to support this action by the State Superintendent.
- As State Superintendent, Dr. Salmon has broad legal authority to enforce the State's educational laws. Her authority is grounded in Section 2-303(b)(1) of the Education Article, which states, and I quote:

- “The State Superintendent shall enforce the provisions of:
 - (i) This article that are within his jurisdiction; and
 - (ii) The bylaws, rules, and regulations of the State Board.”
- During Thursday’s press conference, Governor Hogan also stated that he will explore all possible means to ensure that school systems adhere to the mandate and educators return to in-person instruction.
- As a means of ensuring compliance, Section 2-303(b)(2) provides, and again I quote, “If an educational institution or county board violates any of these provisions, the State Superintendent, by written notice, may require the State Comptroller to withhold from that institution or board:
 - (i) All or any part of an appropriation made by the General Assembly; and
 - (ii) All or any part of any other payment from funds budgeted by the State.”
- The Maryland State Board of Education and the State Superintendent operate under a shared governance structure, as do local boards of education and local superintendents. The State Board has not overturned or modified Dr. Salmon’s directive, and in consultation with our General Counsel, we believe it is enforceable.
- Therefore, the plan I will be detailing this afternoon complies with Dr. Salmon’s directive. We are moving forward with our development and implementation of a hybrid model by March 1st with the understanding that the State Superintendent has the authority to make the decision to mandate a return to in-person instruction. How we determine the implementation is up to us and will be discussed in my presentation tonight.

Updated MSDE Guidance

- This weekend, The Maryland State Department of Education provided updated guidance in the form of a document titled, “Maryland School Reopening Guidance” to help guide our planning process. I will now lift up parts of that guidance that are relevant to our planning and decision making.
- The updated guidance document states, and I quote, *“Some degree of in-person learning should be the immediate goal for all students in all jurisdictions.”* The guidance then goes on to provide two educational design options.

- Option one, which MSDE states is the recommended option, provides daily in-person learning for students with disabilities, special learning needs, difficulty with virtual learning, and English learners. All other students are to *"return to school in a hybrid model according to the local school system plan."*
- Just as the first option, the second option also provides daily in-person learning for students with disabilities, special learning needs, difficulty with virtual learning, and English learners. It similarly states that elementary and CTE students *"return to school in a hybrid model according to the local school system plan."* Where it differs from option one is that it states that all secondary students are *"engaged in virtual learning according to the local school system plan."*

Vaccine's Influence on Reopening

- I am pleased that we have entered phase 1B of vaccine distribution. Last week, many of our School Nurses and Health Assistants received the vaccine and all staff will receive additional information and guidance on how the vaccine will be administered to remaining staff.
- At Thursday's press conference, Dr. Jinlene Chan, Maryland's acting deputy secretary for public health, encouraged educators to receive the vaccine when they are able, but also stressed that the administration of the vaccine should not be a determining factor in whether to open school buildings to students and staff.
- At the press conference, Dr. Chan stated, and I quote, *"I would emphasize, that school reopening decisions should not be based on the availability of vaccination or the level of vaccination among staff."*
- I have been in constant contact with Dr. Maura Rossman, Howard County's Health Officer, and our teams have worked closely since the start of this pandemic. Dr. Rossman and her team have helped craft our school reopening plans since they began last summer.
- I spoke with Dr. Rossman over the weekend and she affirmed Dr. Chan's comments and agrees that the pace of vaccinations should not impact decisions related to reopening and she will be able to discuss further when she joins us.

COVID-19 Metrics

- I am pleased to share that the sharp rise in cases that we have experienced this winter seems to be on an encouraging downward trend. As of Sunday, January 24th, the 7-day

average for positive cases per 100,000 county residents was 24.21 which took us out of red and into orange in the Board's approved metrics, and the 7-day average positivity rate was 5.59%.

- In the Board's approved metrics, hybrid instruction may begin when the 7-day average for positive cases per 100,000 county residents is below 10 and the positivity rate is at or below 5%. Though we are not yet at these thresholds, our numbers locally are on a downward trend, which is encouraging.
- However, at no time during Thursday's press conference, and nowhere in the State's guidance document, is there a requirement that health metrics be at a certain level prior to implementing a hybrid instructional model. In fact, the guidance document goes to great lengths to demonstrate that the spread in schools does not align to the spread and metrics of the general population.
- I would welcome a discussion by the Board on this topic, but I would offer that the mandate by the state is not dependent on current health metrics. They clearly expect local districts to implement a hybrid solution by March 1st regardless of the metrics.

Implementation of a Hybrid Plan

- Now, I will provide a foundational understanding of the work that has been done since Thursday's announcement in preparation for this work session. I want to commend the many staff members who spent the better part of their weekend in meetings and preparing for today. Your work has not gone unnoticed.
- During last Thursday's Board of Education meeting, I reversed the decision to implement changes to third quarter schedules as a result of this new mandate. Additionally, I made the decision to suspend planning related to small group learning supports in order to give our staff ample time to plan for students' return in a hybrid model.
- Furthermore, the Board passed motions for the use of concurrent teaching and the development of full-day models. The model being developed will include a virtual option for any students and families who are not comfortable returning to in-person instruction.
- The plan that will be introduced and discussed today takes all of that, and the guidance provided by the State, into consideration.
- Today, staff will detail a plan that will be implemented in three phases.

- Phase one would begin on March 1st and include an option for daily in-person learning for students with disabilities, special learning needs, difficulty with virtual learning, and English learners - as directed by the State. These students would receive an option for in-person instruction for five days a week and all phases would require tiered bussing schedules.
- Phase two would begin two weeks later, on March 15th, and will include students from PreK through 2, those in grades 6, 9, and 12, and students who participate in our CTE program in the Applications and Research Laboratory - or ARL.
- The third phase would begin two weeks after phase two, on March 29th, and include a hybrid option for all remaining students.
- All students will have the option of remaining virtual through the end of the 2020-2021 school year.
- On March 1st, all students and staff would transition from the current virtual schedule to a new hybrid schedule even before most students have the opportunity to attend in-person. Attempting to simultaneously conduct two separate schedules would be essentially impossible.
- One of the next immediate steps that we must accomplish is to connect with each staff member and understand their intentions for returning, taking a leave of absence, or pursue other options available to them. Additionally, we will reach out to families to understand how many students plan to return in-person.
- The phased solution that I outlined will help us work to overcome any staffing gaps caused by discrepancies between the number of students and staff who plan to return. As we fully implement any plan, all safety measures and personal protective equipment to keep students and staff safe will be in full effect.
- I want to make clear that students and staff who return to school buildings and/or ride school buses will wear protective face masks and adhere to social distancing and other guidelines to ensure we maintain a healthy school and work environment. HCPSS staff will continue to work closely with the Howard County Health Department to respond to cases that impact our schools and classrooms and in implementing preventative and responsive actions.

- Ultimately, the plan that will be presented today is a measured approach honoring the Board's decision-making along with the State's directives while bringing students and staff back in a safe way.
- We are continuing to prepare for the start of fall athletics beginning as scheduled on February 13th as part of the State's plan.
- Additionally, the Board will be making a decision on in-person Board meetings and my staff has outlined a plan for the return of additional central office staff back to on-site locations.
- Finally, I would like to commend and thank the remarkable staff who have been coming in to work in our buildings since the start of the pandemic. This includes our wonderful teams and individuals from food services, technology, school administrators, custodial staff, grounds, building maintenance and many others, including central office staff and special education staff providing in-person supports. I know that many teachers have been teaching from their classrooms and staff have been working in their offices as well. I thank each of you for continuing to come in to work to support the daily functions of our system and provide needed support to students and families. Your efforts have not gone unnoticed.
- I will now turn over to Mr. Scott Ruehl, Director of Leadership Development, who will detail the hybrid model and lead the Board in discussion.