

Del Norte schools ready for upcoming year

August 13, 2021



UPDATE: On Wednesday, August 13 Gov. Gavin Newsom announced teachers and other school employees would be required to be vaccinated for the 2021-2022 school year or face weekly testing.

For 18 months now, Superintendent Jeff Harris has led the Del Norte Unified School District through an ever-changing environment due to COVID-19. With the 2021-22 school year just around the bend, Harris said the district has learned one important lesson from the pandemic.

“We learned not to trust when somebody says, ‘this is what you’re going to do,’ because we are always planning for the next worst thing,” said Harris.

The head of Del Norte schools sat down with the Triplicate last week to discuss reopening and potential COVID-19 guidelines for the upcoming school year. But first, he described what the beginning of the pandemic — March 9, 2020 — was like for him.

“I went down to Sacramento with a bunch of other county superintendents, we went to the governor’s conference room; he came out and he said, ‘there’s a cruise ship parked in the harbor, and there are some

people who have COVID-19...But, I guarantee you, schools are not going to shut down. There's nothing you guys have to worry about.'"

"That same week, there was an executive order that said schools should be shutting down," said Harris.

Will students and staff be required to wear masks?

"What we are looking at right now is, masks are required for all students when they're indoors. Masks are required for all adults whenever there are students present. Outdoors, masks are currently optional. When students are gone, and we only have our staff left, only our unvaccinated staff will have to continue to wear masks."

How will testing work for students and staff?

We are not required by the California Department of Public Health to provide surveillance (weekly) testing.

For anybody who is symptomatic, we do have testing at our nurse's station, or there are local testing facilities that they can go to, and we do ask that they get tested."

What happens when a student or staff member tests positive for COVID-19?

"If a child or a teacher tests positive, then there is quarantine, there is still contact tracing, but now there is something called a modified quarantine. Basically, a modified quarantine is that the exposed individual, if they were wearing a mask, can continue to come to school or teach, as long as they're asymptomatic, are tested twice-a-week and continue to wear masks. They can't participate in extracurricular activities, sports or community-wide events."

"If the child was exposed to COVID-19 and was not wearing a mask, then they are quarantining like they did last year for 7-14 days depending on when they were exposed and other criteria."

"The benefit to being indoors and wearing a mask is, if there's an actual positive case, the students around that positive case won't necessarily have to go home."

What will middle and high school sports look like?

"At this point, sports are back on and full-time as planned. What we don't know is about indoor sports — volleyball. Will our volleyball players have to wear masks indoors? Wrestling. Will they have to wear masks indoors?"

"We don't know about testing. Last year, we had to test every athlete weekly prior to playing. We don't know those pieces, that [information] has not come out yet."

How does the district plan to re-engage with students who were challenged by distance learning or other impacts of the pandemic?

"We have a whole bunch of new supports. For the first time in a long time, we have a counselor at every school site this year, and we're going to be doing a lot more outreach to families."

“We have a new program specialist who will be working with Hmong family engagement. We have a program specialist who will be working with English learners and our Hispanic and Latinx families. We have two other employees who will be working with our American Indian families.”

“For every school, we are looking at hiring a family engagement liaison. So that’s somebody who can actually work directly with families of the chronically absent students, of students who are struggling either socially, emotionally, academically or behaviorally, because we are going to have some young kids come in who have not been in a social setting since preschool.”

“It’s all hands on deck to make these connections and rebuild relationships that we’ve been forced to distance.”

The Del Norte Unified School district is hiring for many teaching and non-teaching positions, both part-time and full-time. A full list of the district’s job openings can be found on the school district’s website:

<https://www.dnUSD.org/hiring>

All COVID-19 guidelines for the 2021-2022 school year can be found on the California Department of Public Health website: <https://www.cdph.ca.gov>