

School board plans for blend of in-class and distance learning for elementary schools

July 15, 2020



After surveys, meetings and debate, Del Norte Unified School District has a tentative plan for reopening elementary schools Aug. 24.

The Board of Trustees voted Tuesday to go with a blend of in-class and distance learning — if allowed by the state.

On Tuesday, Harris told the board of trustees he's receiving mixed messages in recent meetings with state and local officials.

“With rapidly changing circumstances in California, Oregon and other states with conflicting guidance coming in from the federal and state governments, we don't know what we'll be allowed to do Aug. 24,” he said.

After two four-hour meetings this week and last weighing public and employee input, the trustees settled on a “2-day on, 3-day off” schedule for K-8 schools and Crescent Elk Middle School. This will put students from Smith River, Redwood and Mountain elementary schools and Crescent Elk Middle School in the classroom with teachers for two days a week and the rest spent learning remotely.

Classrooms would be split, with half the students attending at a time.

The plan could change, though, because trustees also promised to examine whether an “AM/PM model” can be adopted at the K-5 schools within Crescent City limits and Margaret Keating Elementary School in Klamath. Such a plan would divide students into morning and afternoon “cohorts.” However, such a model would create issues with transportation, meals and the need to clean and disinfect classrooms between use.

The board voted 4-1 to adopt the concept — with many details to be worked out. District 5 Trustee Jamie Forkner dissented.

“I voted no because I think we need some clear direction,” Forkner told her colleagues. “And to look at more feasibility, you guys have already done that. We need to make a determination so people can move forward and not delay it for another month.”

“Knowing what we know now, this is likely what we’ll go with Aug. 24. Could change dramatically,” Harris told The Triplicate. “Our intent is to really start to put that plan together in the next three weeks or so, given the totality of where we’re at with the coronavirus in the community.”

Masks important

Dr. Warren Rehwaldt, Del Norte County’s Public Health Officer, said facial coverings would remain the key to a successful learning environment.

“In a nutshell, we believe in source control through facial coverings for asymptomatic persons. A big take-home message from us is the concept of cohorting, trying to keep kids within small, functional groups that remain together,” Rehwaldt told the trustees.

“We expect kids are going to be bringing this virus to school, taking it home from school sometimes. It’s going to happen in our schools; there’s no getting around it. We want to keep those transmissions within a small group because that has less impact on the school as a whole. And makes it easier to do contact tracing.”

He explained he and other health officers have built into their recommendations more flexibility for social distancing, such as not mandating every interaction be six feet apart.

“What we think about most of who’s at risk in the school environment is the staff and the parents and grandparents. There are some very high-risk families kids are staying with at home,” he said.

With the vote on the blended learning model taken, Harris said the next step is to get the stakeholders back together to “wrap our head around what this is going to look like.”

“There are going to be challenges. We have so many people who are on vacation; we’re going to have to get people back together as fast as we can. Putting together some more workgroups and committees, I encourage each board member to choose one or two committees to sit on, so we have a broader understanding of what we’re doing,” Harris said.

“I do think we’re going to have to come back together prior to the first August meeting for a final determination on what does it look like to re-start school. Distance learning will be made available to anyone who needs it,” Harris added.