

Superintendent faces ‘a million questions’ with no definitive reopening plan yet for Aug. 24

July 29, 2020



With the planned start of school on Aug. 24 just weeks away, Del Norte Unified School District is beginning to get an idea of what parents might prefer — but ever-changing state rules and uncertainty about the spread of COVID-19 leave many questions unanswered.

Superintendent Jeff Harris said he knows parents still have "a million questions" about how school will start. A tentative plan is that students will be offered a blend of in-class education and distance learning or a fully online program — but a final plan is not yet in place.

The district has asked parents to answer a basic question on a recent survey that is still underway: If given a choice between online only or a blended approach of two days per week onsite and three days at home with online work, which do parents prefer?

As of July 27, when Harris provided an update via a video posted on the district's Facebook page, 850 respondents chose a blended learning model, with either Monday/Wednesday or Tuesday/Thursday cohorts

and nearly 200 chose distance learning only.

He said he's had teachers reach out to him expressing a desire to teach either in person or distance learning, but noted that the administration doesn't know yet what to ask of teachers until it has the responses back from parents (see related story).

Harris said the state continues to revise reopening guidance. Some revised guidance July 17 even caught the administration by surprise.

That guidance states that any activity with the potential spread of droplets is prohibited, including band and choir, Harris said.

He said this brings up some questions, such as can elementary students sing the ABCs?

Assistant Superintendent Tom Kissinger is working on that question and others in talks with music teachers this week.

Harris said the district has 16 work groups looking at everything from preschool to transportation services, to special education, to curriculum and instruction.

"We're taking 100 years of education and condensing it down into restructuring over the next 3-4 weeks," he said.

He also addressed ongoing health concerns he's heard from the community.

"What officials have said when you have places where people gather, including schools, you're not going to stop the spread of COVID-19," Harris explained in his video "We are going to minimize and slow that spread. This will be done by following California Department of Public Health guidelines, including face masks."

The CDPH recommends that children under age 2 not wear face masks, but strongly recommends ages 2 through second grade wear them. Grades three through 12 and teachers will be required to wear a face mask when they are in a classroom.

Harris added that for teachers working with younger or special needs students, a face shield might be substituted and there will be exemptions for at risk students or those with difficulty with breathing.

To provide a second layer of protection against the spread of COVID-19, Harris said every classroom will have a hand-washing sink with soap or have hand sanitizer available.

The CDPH recommends maintaining a social distance in classrooms of 6-feet apart. But Harris said that equates to a 12-foot bubble of personal space, which Del Norte County Public Health Officer Warren Rehwaldt agrees is not very realistic.

"He has said he and his colleagues have come to the conclusion if you can be between 3-6 feet apart, that's optimal," Harris said.

So far, the district's efforts have focused on options for elementary students. By sometime in the first week of August Harris expects plans for Crescent Elk Middle School and Del Norte High School to be unveiled.