



**WALTON COUNTY
SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Update from Superintendent A. Russell Hughes

June 11, 2020

Today, Governor DeSantis, Commissioner Corcoran, and the Florida Department of Education released a 150-page plan entitled “Re-opening Florida Schools and the CARES Act: Closing Achievement Gaps and Creating Safe Spaces for Learning”. The document provides specific guidance on many school topics, such as social distancing, mask use, transportation, academics, school events, and more. The report serves as a recommendation to Florida Superintendents and school districts and allows for local decision making based on what is best for individual counties.

Today’s announcement is great news for Walton, because we have been working on a re-opening plan specific to our needs for the past several weeks. As Superintendent, I created a Re-opening Task Force in May which is meeting regularly and includes expert stakeholders from the Florida Department of Health and Walton County Emergency Management. Many of the topics being focused on by the task force have been guided by COVID-19 data; Florida’s phases, which were established by our Governor; CDC guidelines; and our recent parent survey results. For example, in our survey data, only 5% of our parents indicated that their students may not return to our brick and mortar buildings and are considering Walton Virtual School. With that input, we immediately started preparing for our next steps and ultimately for the restart of our school year on August 10, 2020.

To start, we have carefully and strategically begun bringing small groups of students onto our campuses. On June 1st, we were able to serve families by opening our SPICE program to 180 students at four schools. To date, this program has been very successful, and the process has allowed us to transition effectively keeping our children and employees safe.

Our district will move to a second step on June 15th when we welcome an additional wave of students for the purpose of restarting extracurricular activities. This next step will allow us to bring on more students and employees while still moving meticulously. We have learned a great deal from these small steps, including everything from how to screen students and employees quickly and efficiently to keeping siblings together to minimize exposure.

Next, in July, we hope to continue bringing additional students back for our annual Summer Bridge and other types of educational programs to help fill in learning gaps from the last nine weeks and/or help students who may need a jumpstart to the 2020-2021 school year.

In preparation for the new year, we are working hard to provide answers, options, and innovative solutions. As our state and nation moves forward, we will begin to see school districts across America discuss non-traditional ideas for the educational process. We do know that school will look different. COVID-19 effects, phases, and information may continue to change, so traditional school processes like scheduling, car drop off, school lunches, buses, and more may change with what we know and learn. For example, whether we wear masks, not wear masks, or choose to wear masks, all will be addressed. Please know over the coming weeks, our school district will determine what is best for all stakeholders. We will work hard to achieve and are committed to the best re-opening plan for our district. Rest assured, this task, and likewise making it EPIC, is taken seriously for the well-being of our children and greater community.

Please continue to look for additional information from my office which will be rolled out in the weeks to come. When decisions are made, you will be the first to know, and we will post the information as soon as we finalize it. Until then, if you hear rumors or have questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to your school(s) and/or the district office. Thank you for your trust, confidence, and belief in our school district, and thank you for giving us time and grace to make the best decisions for our children.