

IN-PERSON CLASSES TO BEGIN SEPTEMBER 28th; SAFE AT SCHOOL GUIDELINES TO BE FOLLOWED

The Harlan County Board of Education voted Friday to allow the district's schools to reopen to in-person learning beginning Monday, September 28th.

The in-person instruction will occur on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, initially, and then shift to four days per week at the end of the nine weeks or trimester.

Superintendent Brent Roark said he is hopeful classrooms can be open for five days of instruction by late December.

Roark told the board members during the special session that the district's principals were in agreement with the reopening plan.

"I ask you to consider or to strongly consider letting us do that," said Roark.

The superintendent explained that with the plan he presented there is no alphabet rotation as previously planned and that the in-person instruction will be open to all students who wish to return. Roark emphasized the healthy at school protocols are to be followed in each facility. He said masks must be worn appropriately at all times except when students are eating or drinking or when they are outdoors and have at least six feet between them and another student. Masks must cover the mouth and nose.

Board member Myra Mosley asked about several safety protocols, including tracking of preventive disinfecting efforts and regular cleaning. Roark said a schedule will be posted and signed off on, much like those visible at amusement parks.

Mosley said she understands wearing masks can be difficult, noting "It is difficult for me." However, she said it is important that parents and guardians know the district will follow the mandatory guidelines to protect their children.

"This is our chance we have to be back in school," said Roark, stating the guidelines are vital to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. He said the masking requirement shall be followed. It is a major piece of prevention if the district hopes continue offering in-person instruction.

"I don't want to blow this," said Roark. "We can make it be successful or we can sabotage ourselves."

He said that in a school setting, the safety at work guidelines are different than safe at school guidelines.

"The safe at school guidelines say the mask has to be worn at all times. Even if they are seated six feet apart, students and staff must wear the mask under safe at school guidelines. There are only two exceptions – active eating and drinking or outside and six feet apart," said Roark.

Board Member John Wes Sheffield asked about the type of mask required for students. Roark said masks are available at schools for students. He said cloth masks are recommended. He emphasized personal masks brought into the buildings must meet dress code. Political messages are prohibited. Roark said he will work with principals to schedule frequent breaks to allow students to be outside upon their return to in-person learning. He believes breaks from the masks to be vital.

Responding to a question from board member Wallace Napier on servicing students with special needs, Roark said small groups are coming into the schools now to receive services. He said the restriction is that no more than 14 students can be present for more than two hours.

He said the district is running buses to transport students for the special services called "targeted intervention."

Board Member Emma Donnece Henson said she felt the proposal presented to be an acceptable plan, providing choices and options for the parents and guardians.

Chairman Gary Farmer said he had heard from working parents that Friday is a difficult day to obtain childcare. He supported in-person classes to include Fridays.

The board voted unanimously for the in-person plan presented.

Roark said he is pleased with the virtual learning implemented in the district.

“Our principals have done an unbelievable job,” said Roark “There is no business or industry in this nation that could have one delivery model like we had and change it as fast as our principals and staff accomplished with our transition. We are a service provider. We work for the parents, the families. We provide a service. For our entire careers we provided service under one model, which was the ‘traditional kids come to school and we deliver instruction to them.’ We didn’t do anything else. In a matter of a couple weeks, from August 10 to the 31st, we completely retooled how we did business.” Roark continued stating “There is no service oriented business in this nation that in a two-week time frame can stop what they’ve been doing for 30, 40, 50, 60 or 70 years and turn around and do something totally different and do it with the degree of success we’ve done. It is not perfect, but it is miraculous what our teachers, working nights and weekends, have done to make it happen. I can’t praise our teachers, principals and technology department enough... Every day it is getting better and better. I feel like we are in a sweet spot right now to where we can hold until we get to this three days a week in-person instruction.”

In a related matter, Mosley asked if the current type of meals being delivered will continue or will the cafeteria workers prepare hot meals once in-person classes begin.

Prepackaged meals will continue for students remaining on virtual classes. Those attending in-person classes will receive hot meals at school, Roark said.

Meals will be served to students in their classrooms as part of the safe at school guidelines.

Mosley said she is excited the food service staff will prepare meals again, noting she believes those to be much more nutritional for students than those served prepackaged.

In other action, the board approved an emergency certification request for a math teacher. The action was required as no qualified applications were received on multiple postings and recruitment efforts were unsuccessful.