

## BACK TO SCHOOL?

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 17 July 2020 03:21

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### Hybrid of in-person/online learning to start

The COVID-19 pandemic cut short in-person learning for students across the country last spring. Many students had to transition to learning remotely and adjust to the challenges that came with learning in this manner.

Since the pandemic still has a grip on the country as fall gets closer and students have a school year to prepare for, the conversation has turned to how best to prepare both students and teachers for what could be another year of having to learn remotely.

The Gallup-McKinley County Schools Board of Education discussed these plans during their July 6 meeting.

“Obviously, safety is the number one priority for students and staff,” Superintendent Mike Hyatt said. “We’re working very hard to create and sustain a clean and safe environment for everyone on our school campuses.”

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Hyatt said the goal of the board is to find a style of learning that will satisfy each person and provide a safe and effective environment while also being flexible with the plans they outline.

“Things can change, and they will,” Hyatt said. “We’ll adjust whether things improve or if the pandemic impacts our region in a negative way.”

## ***MOVING ONLINE***

Per the discussion of plans laid out by Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, the state is requiring schools to start the year at 50 percent capacity. Then depending on how the pandemic impacts the state as the school year progresses, the district can bring more students onto campuses, or they can have more students move to distance learning.

The earliest a school district can open is Aug. 3, which can change depending on the negotiations with the unions, Hyatt said.

As a result, GMCS plans to implement a hybrid schedule of in-person learning with distance learning by splitting students into two groups.

Each group of students will spend two days a week from Monday to Thursday at their respective school, then every student will be able to continue lessons remotely on Friday.

Hyatt said each student will be provided either a laptop or an iPad so they can carry out their distance learning, though he did admit internet access still poses a challenge for students living in remote parts of the region.

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In addition to this hybrid model of learning, Hyatt said parents will be able to choose to have their child learn from a distance full-time.

“If students and their parents don’t feel safe about being on campus, they can opt for this route,” Hyatt said.

## ***STUDENT SAFETY***

As for having students safely on school premises, Hyatt said the district has upgraded its cleaning supplies to provide efficient and effective sanitation in each building, as well as providing masks for students and staff, and requiring mask use unless the person has a documented medical history that prevents such use.

The supplies are in addition to new safety protocols such as: having students’ desks spaced six feet apart; students being trained in proper safety and prevention measures; buildings and buses being sanitized throughout the week; and clear instructions on proper social distancing in hallways and lunch spaces.

Dist. 3 Board Member Priscilla Manuelito said creating a safe environment is one of the biggest concerns of her district’s constituents.

“I think we need to be mindful of the schools that are more worn down than others with ventilation systems,” Manuelito said. “The comfort level of our staff are [sic] also something we need to be assertive towards. We have a lot of staff that are nervous, like they’re caring for their elders or their own kids.”

This is why the board should also send out a survey to faculty to see how members feel about the reopening plans, she said.

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“Our parents, school leaders, administrators, local doctors need to have their voices heard on this matter,” Manuelito said. “The City Council has wanted us to be more active with them, and local legislators and tribal officials, too. We need to continue to see what we can do and not rely on just ourselves, but to reach out to other entities that can help out and give us some new ideas.”

## ***AN EFFECTIVE ROUTE***

Hyatt said most of the teachers and staff members feel the students learn best when they are present at school, which is why they will focus on creating a safe environment.

“It simply is better learning face to face, which is why we’re hoping as many students as possible come in for learning, so we can get to some level of normalcy,” he said.

The rest of the board had further thoughts on the state’s plans. Dist. 1 Member Kevin Mitchell asked if some schools can bring in more students depending upon whether a certain number of them decide on a full online learning route.

The full plan for how the school year can unfold is still up in the air, which Hyatt said can be influenced by how many parents opt for full distance learning, which in turn can influence how many students come onto campus for their classes. The parents’ answers will be recorded in a survey the district wants to send out within the next week.

The students’ feelings will also be factored in in determining how many students can be brought onto campuses.

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“We’re going to have to have some commitment for a timeline,” Hyatt said. “If students want to opt for online learning, they are going to have to commit to that route for nine weeks.”

This means students can choose a new model after the nine weeks are up, he added. However, it also means students who want to participate in a hybrid model with in-person learning, may affect the number of students on district campuses.

“That’s an area where we’re going to have to be flexible and have some patience,” Hyatt said. “It’s an ever-changing environment, and we don’t know how much time we’re going to have to do this. We don’t want to lose too much instruction time.”

## ***LEARNING AND ADJUSTING***

Board Vice President Chris Mortensen wanted to know about the ways parents can seek information about each learning route to make the best decision.

“It might make sense for parents to see the conditions of the schools when they’re deciding if they want to go all online or hybrid,” Mortensen said. “Parents want to know what their kids could be exposed to at recess or in PE class.”

Mortensen also asked how McKinley Academy, operated in conjunction with the University of New Mexico-Gallup branch, will operate. This is another area where flexibility will be important, Hyatt said.

“Some of that is to be determined, some of it is dictated by the colleges the students are at,” Hyatt said. “Some colleges have different restrictions on attendance versus online learning, so we typically follow what they want to do.”

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Mortensen said parents may also want to know how any athletic activities could be carried out, which Hyatt said will be available to students who are on campus. He added the situation could also change and they will have to keep parents informed.

“A continual feeding of information as we get it is what needs to go out to parents,” Hyatt said.

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