

State education department discusses school reentry plan

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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The New Mexico Public Education Department spoke with the press about the state's modified reentry plan to get students and staff safely back into schools in a July 24 meeting.

Cabinet Secretary Ryan Stewart represented the department, presented updates to the state's plan, and answered questions from the audience.

The first announcement was that the start of in-person learning at state schools was being moved back until after Labor Day.

"First and foremost, we are going to prioritize the health and safety of students, staff and communities," Stewart said. "We want to put as much distance between the recent surge of virus cases and our students coming back."

Stewart said the PED is monitoring the state's active COVID-19 case count each day and noted how the past several weeks have seen sharp increases, especially in teenagers.

He added the department is committed to getting kids back for in-person learning and restoring some sense of normalcy to the classroom, but that everyone in the state would have to do their part to help.

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“Our kids are counting on it, our educators are counting on it,” Stewart said. “We know our kids have to be back in school because there is no substitute for in-person learning.

Stewart then took questions from viewers, pertaining to subjects like payroll, getting children access to electronic learning means and meals, and specific safety measures.

“We are allowing significant local control in setting each district’s start date,” Stewart said. “It will be up to the local school boards and governments to do so.”

Those districts can also delay the start of in-person learning further as needed, and manage their own payrolls as well.

As for students’ internet connectivity, Stewart said recent surveys showed about 23% of students did not have a compatible device or available connections. This is another area where each district can exercise its local control.

“The schools use money they receive from the CARES Act to address that gap,” he said. “We are putting [CARES funds] towards digital devices and internet [service].”

Stewart said the department’s current challenge is to get fiber optic internet connections out to rural areas, which will be an expensive, years-long commitment.

“We are working with internet providers to get coverage out to those areas, but we don’t have the right infrastructure there,” he said.

Next, Stewart said the PED worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to secure waivers for the school food program so they can continue to serve meals to their students. To date, about nine million meals have been served.

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“We are going to continue to work with them so every district has a plan to ensure their kids have access to meals,” he said.

Stewart spoke about the challenges of bringing certain groups of students into schools, such as special needs students or elementary students. He said the PED has guidance for when these students return to schools in small groups.

As for whether these policies can be enacted safely, Stewart said the department is going to monitor the public health conditions in select regions across the state and make further decisions afterward.

“Some regions and districts can [come back in] more quickly than others,” he said. “We want to look at which regions we can move faster with.”

Stewart spoke about the rise of education pods, where students gather in a shared space to learn outside of school. He said there is not enough concrete information on the number of pods that have popped up across the state, but the department would be interested in learning more about using them effectively.

The catch is, however, deciding how to implement education pods while dealing with the disparate effects they have on different socioeconomic and racial groups, which Stewart said is a common concern across the country.

“We want to think about how we do it [introduce education pods] in an inclusive way to make sure we don’t segregate our students,” he said.

Stewart said the PED is working to get a testing program in place in the event of a potential outbreak in one of the schools.

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“In that instance, the Department of Health will come in and conduct a case investigation and contact tracing,” he said. “They will identify individuals who may have been exposed and have them isolated while we get them tested.”

Depending on the severity of the outbreak, the classroom or school may need to close.

Stewart said conditions can change, as well as these plans, but the PED will continue to keep the safety of students and staff at the forefront. In the meantime, he urged the public to do its part.

“We know if New Mexicans come together and take initiative, we can see our case counts go down,” he said.

By Cody Begaye
Sun Correspondent