From Zoom to CLASSROOM

SANTA FE — The New Mexico Public Education Department announced the state plan to return students safely to classes this fall.

Acknowledging that the pandemic is still with us, on June 23, Education Secretary Ryan Stewart spoke about what the future holds for the next school year.

“We’re not through this pandemic by a long shot, but as we learn to live safely in a COVID-positive world, this collective effort has flattened the curve to the point where we can engage in the process of reentering our school buildings,” he said.

In May, Stewart convened a re-entry task force including educators, parents, administrators, public health officials, and many other stakeholder groups to look at options to safely get students back on track with learning. Surveys of families and educators were conducted.

The state’s goal is to move all schools into a full school schedule as soon as it is safely possible. Across New Mexico, the 2020-2021 school year will begin with a hybrid model in which the number of students in the building is limited to allow for maximum social distancing. Students will rotate between in-person and online learning.

The Department of Health and medical advisory team will continue to aggressively track and regularly assess rates of spread of the virus. Based on the data from this initial period, state health officials will determine when and where schools can safely move into a full reentry mode.

The phased approach allows the state to analyze the impact of a controlled re-entry before moving into a full-scale implementation. This will help ensure that the epidemiological assumptions about how schools impact virus transmission can be thoroughly tested before full re-entry.

Schools will likely need to implement hybrid or remote models at some point in the year. The phased approach allows for preparation and practice in the implementation of this model at the beginning of the year, so that schools and communities are ready for this eventuality later in the year.

The phased approach balances the legitimate concerns of families who expressed anxiety about returning full-scale right away, with those who are rightly eager to return to a full school schedule.

The following requirements will be in place for all schools whether operating in a hybrid or

traditional model:

Large group gatherings will be avoided at school buildings.

Face coverings are required except while eating, drinking and exercising (with very limited exceptions for students and staff with medical conditions precluding wearing of a mask or face shield; those medical conditions must be documented).

Schools must adhere to social distancing requirements of their designated category.

All staff must be screened every day, including a temperature check and review of potential symptoms upon arrival at school.

All staff must participate in ongoing surveillance testing.

All sites must coordinate with local health officials to conduct contact tracing and rapid response testing.

All transportation staff and students boarding buses must wear face coverings.

Meals must be provided to students during both in-person instruction and remote learning.

Schools must create plans for and be prepared to remain in a hybrid model or shift to a distance learning model should health conditions necessitate such actions.

Stewart expressed his confidence that the re-entry plan would keep the health and safety of

students as the top priority in the new school year.