

How will schools reopen in Oregon next fall?

By **Charlie Kanzig**
Correspondent

Oregon Department of Education (ODE) Chief Colt Gill led a digital press conference on Wednesday, June 10 outlining “Ready Schools, Safe Learners,” a plan developed by the Oregon Health Authority, ODE, and Governor Kate Brown, which includes the preliminary guidance for school re-opening in the fall of 2020.

Governor Kate Brown has also created a Healthy School Reopening Council that will contribute guidance over the weeks ahead.

After shutting down in mid-March and relying on distance learning for the remainder of the school year, educational, health, and government leaders are looking for how to provide quality education for next school year while keeping students, teachers, and families safe from health risks due to COVID-19.

Gill acknowledged that it won’t be a “one size fits all” situation for schools across the state.

The guidance document states: “These individual plans will necessarily look different from community to community, as each school in Oregon serves diverse communities with distinct strengths and needs, each has unique physical structures, each includes different staff make-ups and local bargaining agreements, each has experienced varying degrees of impact from COVID-19 outbreaks, and each has access to various levels of readiness to respond to an outbreak.”

Gill’s press conference represented the first of four informational pushes that will

take place before school starts as plans are updated. The rest are scheduled for June 30, July 21, and August 11.

The Ready Schools/Safe Learners guideline, though comprehensive, raised further questions from media listening in on the press conference. School officials have a lot of questions to answer as well.

Gill said from the outset “to accomplish all this in a time like this, in a challenging time like this, we all need to innovate. It is going to take a lot of creativity and thoughts to operate school in the fall.”

That became clear as Gill moved through the highlights of the guideline, which states “Each public school will work under the direction of the school district to develop an Operational Blueprint for Reentry that is tailored to the local context and informed by local needs.”

For example, low population schools might have an easier time of dealing with social distancing within classrooms than schools with more students.

Regardless, the mainstay of reducing potential exposure are universal, including social distancing, hand hygiene, creating small group cohorts, using protective equipment (face shields, face coverings, barriers), environmental

cleaning, isolation of the sick and quarantine of exposed people, and recognizing that outdoor activities are safer than indoor.

Simply tackling the social distancing aspect of the guidelines alone raises many questions. The guidelines require 35 square feet per student so schools are faced with taking room measurements and figuring class sizes. The cohort concept includes limiting the number of groups that students move through. Additionally, questions remain about how students will be transported given challenges of social distancing on buses.

Gill emphasized that the immediate work for school districts lies in preparation for the fall. Districts are expected to work closely with county health authorities as they formulate strategies for safety. He acknowledged that forming teams within districts to do this work is a challenge since most employees are not on year-round contracts.

Given that most of Oregon just entered Phase 2 of re-opening, Gill underlined that inviting 580,000 public school students back into school buildings creates an obvious challenge. Private schools are also required to follow all the safety guidelines.

School districts will be

making plans for safe on-site learning, while also preparing to instruct students safely part-time on site and off site (hybrid) or fully off site (if necessary).

If instruction is done off site, it will be much more comprehensive than what schools were required from this spring’s “distance learning,” according to Gill. “There will be a higher level of daily interaction between teachers and students,” he said.

ODE updates in the coming weeks will bring more clarity to the situation and Sisters School superintendent Curt Scholl, along with building administrators and other team members, will provide more specific, local information as summer progresses.

The district is committed to doing everything possible to meet the needs of Sisters students and families, according to Scholl.

The complete 47 page “Ready Schools/Safe Learners” document can be accessed on the Oregon Department of Education website at <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/healthsafety/Pages/COVID19.aspx>

City plans Hood paving

City work crews will repave a segment of Hood Avenue overnight Thursday to Friday, June 25-26.

The Hood Avenue Travel Lanes Grind & Inlay Project will run from 7 p.m. on Thursday, June 25 to 9 a.m. on Friday, June 26.

According to City of Sisters Public Works Project Coordinator Troy Rayburn, “The goal of the project is to improve street surface and provide pavement preservation from South Pine Street to South Cedar Street to coincide with adjacent parking spaces that were previously completed.”

The project will include removal of the top layer of asphalt and repaving to provide a smooth, crack-free street surface.

“Public Works has endeavored to minimize adverse impact to adjacent businesses by doing the work throughout the evening and early morning hours,” Rayburn stated. “Businesses that open before 9 a.m. on Friday, June 26 should notify staff, delivery services, and anyone else who might park on Hood Avenue to park on adjacent side streets.”

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