

School districts continue to grapple with changing rules

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

After months of meetings and reviewing guidance from the Oregon Department of Education, local school districts developed plans for the start of the school year amid a global pandemic.

As COVID-19 cases continued to climb, the four districts that a majority of Tribal students attend – Willamina, Sheridan, McMinnville and Salem-Keizer – updated their reopening plans from a hybrid model of in-person and remote learning to fully online to begin the school year.

Then, the guidelines were updated for a final time on Tuesday, Aug. 11, to allow for limited in-person instruction with small groups based on certain protocols.

“The new metrics require close partnership between school districts and local public health authorities to oversee a return to in-person instruction in small communities not impacted by COVID-19,” a Department of Education press release stated. “The metrics also clarify limited in-person opportunities in schools required to operate through comprehensive distance learning. Our priority is to return to in-person instruction as soon as it can be accomplished with stability and safety.”

Willamina School District Superintendent Carrie Zimbrick said that the new guidelines have “a lot of rigor.” In-person instruction will be limited to groups of 10 with a two-hour per day time limit and 250 students per building, per week. Students cannot be in more



Photo by Timothy J. Gonzalez

The Willamina School District’s Oaken Hills campus will be without students when the new school year begins on Tuesday, Sept. 15, because of the persistent prevalence of COVID-19 coronavirus cases in Yamhill and Polk counties.

than two groups per day. Staff are limited to three groups of students per day and no more than five per week.

Zimbrick said the district was in meetings to discuss a plan for limited in-person instruction for students. She tentatively expects this to begin in late September. The school year will begin on Tuesday, Sept. 15.

“There are no onsite meals, recess and a bus can have no more than 10 at one time,” Zimbrick said. “(We’re) back to the drawing board.”

The kindergarten through third-grade in-person learning exception outlined in previous state guidance requires counties to have less than 30 cases per 100,000 and test positivity rates of less than 5 percent.

“We still don’t meet the criteria for the K-3 exception, but we can do the 10-person cohorts based on ODE criteria,” Zimbrick said.

In a message posted to the Sheridan School District website, Super-

intendent Dorie Vickery said the updates could potentially affect the start of school, particularly since Sheridan has more than 10 percent of its staff living in Yamhill County.

Before the updated guidance was released, the district planned to start the school year on Tuesday, Sept. 8, with remote learning.

“This guidance provides new information that impacts how we determine when to safely open schools and how to best serve students within the current safety and health requirements,” Vickery said. “Currently, we are working on a plan to bring in several groups of 10 students for two hours for a variety of learning activities.”

Earlier guidance issued on July 28 by the Oregon Health Authority and Oregon Department of Education resulted in most school districts opting for comprehensive distance learning.

Each school district was tasked with determining the decision based on COVID-19 numbers in the county in which it is located in addition to overall state numbers. If a district serves students in multiple counties, case rates and positive numbers must be considered for each county.

That guidance specified that county cases must be below 10 per 100,000 people in the past seven days for three weeks, and positive test results must be less than 5 percent in the preceding seven days for three weeks at both the county and state levels.

Exceptions for students in kindergarten through third grade, remote and rural school districts

with fewer than 100 students, students with disabilities and those in programs such as career technical education would be made provided there was not active COVID-19 school community spread. Also, county cases must be below 30 per 100,000 people in the past seven days for three weeks, and positive test results countywide must be less than 5 percent in the preceding seven days for three weeks.

The Aug. 11 guidance will not change how the McMinnville School District plans to begin the year. Distance learning will start on Monday, Sept. 14.

“We are working on plans to use the exception provision to offer some limited small group learning opportunities, but those plans are not yet firm,” Communications Director Laurie Fry said.

The district is turning its focus to equity in the delivery of online learning.

“We have enough Chromebooks to check out a device to every student in our district and have checked out most of them,” Fry said. “We offered a paper packet version to families who requested them. Some families live too far out to receive adequate Internet service, although we have been working with some providers in our area to improve that. We are also working to set up some dedicated areas in our schools for families to access the district Wi-Fi.”

The district also is reaching out to families who did not participate much in distance learning during the spring, and also offering parent training sessions for those who need technical assistance.

“Our goal is to have every student engaged in the learning process,” Fry said.

The Salem-Keizer School District is still evaluating whether the updated guidelines will affect its plan to begin comprehensive distance learning on Monday, Sept. 14.

“Our leaders are still working to interpret the new guidance and to see what it means for our options for limited in-person opportunities,” District Public Engagement Specialist Aaron Harada said.

For more information on the updated guidelines, visit www.oregon.gov/ode, and click on the “Ready Schools, Safe Learners” tab. ■

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