Background

As the District prepares for the launch of the school year, the primary focus is on the safety of students and staff. ISBE and IDPH have determined it is safe for students and staff to return to school as long as certain safety requirements are met and the state is considered in Phase 3 or 4 of the Restore Illinois plan. These safety requirements will dramatically change the look and feel of school.

As the administration prepared a recommendation for the launch of the school year, there are several factors that guided the decision. The administration is guided by:

- A student-centered approach that addresses students’ health, academic and social-emotional needs
- Identifying a consistent approach that allows for a level of predictability and planning for families, students, and staff.
- Developing a plan that focuses District resources towards the most supportive launch to the year
- The knowledge that no matter what plan the District implements, it is not possible for any school to return to a pre-March 13th “normal” for the foreseeable future

This report provides a summary of the detailed analysis that has been undertaken to date and provides a recommendation that all students begin the year in full-time remote learning that gradually phases-in a return to in-person learning on a timeline determined by the Board taking into consideration the recommendation of the administration, the ability to implement safety protocols, and the quality of the educational experience for students.

Return to In-Person Instruction Requirement

The administration has diligently followed all the guidance from government sources related to returning to in-person instruction. They have tried to navigate the information always keeping the best interests of our students, families, and staff in mind.

On June 23, 2020, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and IDPH issued Part III of their transition joint guidance for schools titled, Starting the 2020-21 School Year. ISBE also issued an FAQ on June 23, 2020 that they continue to revise and update, with the latest update on July 9, 2020. On June 30, 2020 ISBE also issued an FAQ specifically addressing questions related to special education students returning to in-person instruction. On June 30, 2020 ISBE released a letter addressing the use of face shield in lieu of mask, reversing guidance that they had provided on June 23rd.

The title of ISBE’s document is a little misleading as it contains several mandates that all school districts are required to follow. Although adding to the confusion, the mandates are often qualified with “as much as possible”. Some of the main requirements for schools include:
Use of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), including face coverings by all students and staff
Prohibit more than 50 individuals from gathering in one space
Require social distancing of 6 feet be observed as much as possible
Require schools conduct symptom screenings and temperature checks or require that individuals self-certify that they are free of symptoms before entering school buildings and
Require an increase in schoolwide cleaning and disinfection.

In late May, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued re-opening guidance for schools along with a readiness planning tool, which pre-dates the ISBE/IDPH guidance, and focuses heavily on contact tracing. It is unclear whether this guidance will be updated or revised for schools.

On June 25, 2020, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued their planning considerations for the opening of school, emphasizing the importance of in-person instruction on children’s health and well being. In fact, they state: “...the AAP strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school”.

From law firms to state and national professional organizations, there has been no shortage of conflicting guidance and opinions on how best to safely reopen schools. Adding to the planning challenge is the fluidity of the health crisis, the limited scientific knowledge about the disease, and the lack of a unified system of response.

Quite possibly the only thing that everyone agrees upon is the goal of returning all students to a physical presence in the school building eventually.

**Hybrid Models & Other District Plans**

Under the most current guidelines, District 69, because of its large and growing student body, does not have the facilities to implement safe in-person learning for our entire student population.

A return to in-person instruction would require the District to reduce the number of students in a building at any one time. The administration has reviewed both local, state and national plans and found that most plans rely upon a rotation between in-person and remote learning, or volunteers to commit to a full remote program for at least a grading period (and sometimes the year). The rotation models have students physically attending school for some days each week and engaging in remote learning on the other days. Occasionally, those models also include a shortened school day.

The full remote choice models ask parents/guardians to commit to full-time remote learning for a period of time (typically a quarter, trimester, or semester). The deadlines for those commitments are weeks before the start of the school year, to allow the District to develop the in-person plan around the actual number of students. In many of those districts, parents/guardians have expressed frustration about making a commitment now and their inability to change their mind later. Without a firm commitment, the districts
are unable to develop a firm in-person plan. Adding to the uncertainty, anyone choosing the hybrid in-person may end up in full-time remote learning if health conditions worsen or a class/school are forced to quarantine.

Some districts are proposing that teachers utilize a video conferencing tool to broadcast their lessons live from their classroom with some students present. While this solves the need for an early commitment to full remote from parents/guardians, it creates other issues. A key issue is that planning for in-person lessons is different than planning for remote lessons. Remote learners are not simply observers. They need to be engaged in different ways than in-person students. While live streaming from a classroom may initially seem efficient and easy, it actually asks teachers to do the impossible - design effective remote and in-person lessons simultaneously.

There are a few districts that are broadly interpreting the ISBE recommendation to maintain social distancing of 6 feet, as possible. These districts have informed parents that they will open for in-person instruction five days per week without limitation and noted that based on the actual number of students who show up the social distancing of 6 feet may not be possible.

Governor Pritzker, in a recent news conference, cautioned school districts about waiving any of the ISBE/IDPH requirements (e.g. mask wearing) as they will be liable for those decisions, even going so far as to file lawsuits against districts who have said they will not require masks. Several law firms have also issued an alert to districts to carefully review their liability insurance as there have been some instances of exclusions related to COVID-19. Implementing an in-person component is not without liability risks.

Additionally, any in-person instructional model is subject to change and convert to full-time remote instruction without warning. In fact, there are many examples of area schools running summer programming and camps that have had to shut down within the first several days due to COVID concerns.

Other Township Districts
The township elementary school superintendents have been meeting regularly since March, and have shared their planning discussions. Early on the township districts determined that it would be difficult to implement the same plan. Any plan depends upon enrollment of the district, average class sizes, size of buildings and individual classrooms, and available financial resources. Each district has engaged in planning based on their individual circumstances.

District 219 recently announced that they will phase-in a return to in-person instruction model and begin the year engaged in full-time remote learning. District 219 moved the student start date from August 12 to August 17 to allow for additional teacher training. They plan to begin having students return to the school building on a limited basis, and in smaller numbers beginning after Labor Day. District 219 has noted that they will prioritize functions and activities that are best served face to face, rather than through remote learning. Their identified priorities for in-person instruction include:

- special education needs,
- 504 plans,
- English language support
- laboratory experiences
- important hands-on activities
- access to certain software and
- social-emotional experiences.

**Impact on Children and Families**

Families and our students crave a return to normalcy and the familiar. However, the return to schools will look anything but normal and will require significant adjustments in how we have typically operated. Classrooms will be reduced to rows of student desks facing the same direction with the teacher at the front of the room. Students will be unable to access the cafeteria, gyms, or other specialized spaces as their movement in the building is limited. Social interactions will be limited as the guidance restricts the sharing of supplies and activities that require physical collaboration. With any in-person model, there will be the constant threat of an abrupt suspension of in-person, coupled with health and safety worries.

Our schools provide more than just education. Children’s health and wellness needs are met at school, and the school addresses childcare needs for many families. Fortunately, in District 69 we have a strong Community Schools program that has allowed us to nimbly and flexibly work to address those individual needs. This program has continued to expand with the receipt of the Full Service Community Schools grant, and they will continue to leverage resources within the community to benefit and serve our families’ needs.

While early indicators seem to point to a reduced health risk to children, especially children under 10 years old, researchers are still learning about the virus, its health implications for children, and whether children transmit the disease to adults. Low risk is not without risk, and caution is warranted when making a decision that could mean serious illness or death. There is also much that is unknown about possible long-term health impacts.

**Impact on Staff**

Staff miss being physically present with their students, and the sense of normalcy that the school year brings. A physical return to the school with students present increases their potential exposure. Staff have concerns about how their classroom environment will be set up, and how that impacts the learning environment. The safety protocols return their classrooms to a 1950’s environment with unmovable desks all facing forward, and limit their instructional options.

Staff with young children need to work out childcare arrangements, especially for their school-age children who may not be able to attend school each day. Staff seek time to plan for a return to in-person learning and the opportunity to adjust their own classrooms in response to safety protocols. They also want to guide their students about these changes before students return to the school setting. Staff members are concerned about being able to effectively plan for both in-person and remote learning at the same time.
The District focused summer professional development on improving teachers’ remote learning skills. Teachers earned various certifications and participated in training with objectives to increase their effectiveness in designing lessons for the remote environment. A large cohort of teacher leaders will be earning a microcredential in blended learning beginning in August, which will further enhance our teachers’ skill in designing effective remote learning experiences. A Remote Learning Plan 2.0 has been developed based on feedback from families, students and staff.

**Remote Learning 2.0**

Beginning in the Fall 2020, the District will implement Remote Learning 2.0, a revised remote learning plan that reflects feedback from parents/guardians, staff, and students. Remote Learning 2.0 builds upon the successes of the spring plan, and includes many enhancements.

The spring remote learning plans were developed in response to the unexpected health crisis, and ISBE significantly modified the requirements to grant significant latitude to schools. The spring plans mandated that grades and attendance would not count, and significantly reduced the amount of instructional time required to ease stress on families and educators.

The Remote Learning 2.0 plan will include the following enhancements:

- Utilize a primarily asynchronous learning approach for delivering curriculum and instruction to provide maximum flexibility for students and their families
- Increase synchronous teacher engagement with students to include at least a daily synchronous session (e.g. preK-5 class meetings and grades 6-8 advisory) and consistent, daily help sessions for students
- Opportunities for students to collaborate with each other (peer to peer) in smaller video conferencing groups
- Distribution of physical materials and supply kits to support units of instruction to reduce sole dependency on technology, especially for younger learners
- Increased focus on project based learning that reduces screen time
- Regular synchronous support sessions led by teachers for their student’s parents/caregivers to help them better support their child’s learning at home
- Regularly scheduled synchronous engagement for junior high students that provides regular access to each core teacher
- Consistently scheduled fine arts, PE/Health, library and other specials classes
- Grades and attendance
- Assessment practices that provide students and parents with feedback on each learner’s progress, and align with remote learning expectations
- Regular (weekly) communication from the teacher to the parents about progress on remote learning
- Enhanced technology to improve access and reduce tech glitches for videos
- Implementation of a standard teacher workday that aligns with the contractual workday
- Staff physically reporting to work to access all of their learning materials, supports, and tools*
● In-person instruction/services to specific individuals or small groups of students to supplement their full-time remote learning experience*

*Requires Region 10 to be classified as Phase 3 or 4 under the Restore Illinois criteria

**Administrative Recommendation: Full-Time Remote Learning to Start Year**

In order to best support our students, the administration is recommending that District 69 implement a phase-in approach to the 2020-21 school year. Beginning August 24, 2020, all students will engage in full-time Remote Learning 2.0. This plan most closely aligns with District 219’s phase-in plan, allows for the district to establish remote learning expectations with all students, and provides an opportunity to monitor the health data to ensure that a return to in person is safe for students and staff.

The full-time Remote Learning 2.0 plan provides the consistency, planning and predictability that our families, students and staff desire. The District can provide adequate notice to staff and families so they can begin their personal preparation. The plan does not require alternative plans and is not dependent on factors outside the District’s control. This allows the District to focus all of its resources towards a successful and supportive launch. Full-time remote learning is the most student-centered of all the options as our staff can develop plans that address the academic and social-emotional needs of students, rather than focusing on safety protocols, contingency planning, and procurement of items (e.g. masks, spacing of classrooms).

Our School Leadership Teams can now direct their energy to the successful implementation of Remote Learning 2.0. Plans can be made to:

- Provide social-emotional support by having students start the year meeting with their 2019-20 class groupings before a virtual transition/introduction to their 2020-21 teacher(s).
- Assess student learning and current levels of performance before determining 2020-21 class groupings
- Develop transition activities and plans for students who are transitioning to a new building or entering school for the first time
- Provide limited in-person opportunities on an appointment basis for assessment purposes, therapeutic interventions, and/or meeting the teacher
- Prepare physical materials and supply kits to support at-home learning, and distribute them to students
- Provide parent training and orientation to Remote Learning 2.0

Finally, since it is not possible for any school to return to a pre-March 13th “normal” for the foreseeable future, Remote Learning 2.0 is the best option to ensure a quality education experience for all of our students.

**Next Steps**

The Remote Learning 2.0 start to the school year is slated for consideration and approval in the consent agenda. Pending Board approval, an initial communication will go out to parents informing them of the plan for the start of the school year.
Over the next month, each building’s SLT will develop plans for how best to launch the school year with all students in a full remote learning environment, including determining how best to assess student learning. Students will start the year in their 2019-20 class groupings which were left intact as a way to provide the most flexibility to start the year. For classroom teachers who are no longer with the district, another familiar teacher will be assigned as the point person. Students new to the district will either be assigned to an existing grouping or clustered together. Logistics related to incoming Kindergarten and PreK students will need to be determined. New class groupings and assignments will be made, and there will be a gradual transition from the 2019-20 teacher(s) to the 2020-21 teacher(s).

As long as our region’s health metrics allow (e.g. Phase 3 or 4), 10-month support staff will physically return to buildings on August 17th and teachers will return on August 19th. With students not present in the building there is ample room for physical distancing. Staff’s physical presence in the buildings will allow them to prepare materials for student use, organize their physical space for the return of students, practice safety protocols prior to students returning, and provide access to a full complement of instructional tools and learning materials.

The Community Schools team will continue to reach out to families to identify any support needed. The team will also begin working with partner organizations to identify potential childcare options.

It is anticipated that Remote Learning 2.0 will extend for at least several weeks. The Board will continue to be regularly updated with the first update at their September 18, 2020 meeting, and additional reports each month following. Information will be communicated to families on a regular basis.