

Update on Okaloosa Schools From Superintendent Chambers September 10, 2021

As we enter the 6th week of school, I wanted to take this opportunity to reach out to our parents, families, school district, and the community to provide an update on Okaloosa Schools and to thank you for your patience, support, and generosity during a very trying start to the school year. Three months ago, school districts across the state, to include Okaloosa, were planning to start a more normal school year. As we approached the first day of school on August 10th, we still held a sense of optimism and hope for a smooth start to the year for our students and employees. And yet, since school began, we have experienced the effects of two hurricanes, the impact of student and employee isolations and quarantines due to COVID-19, the difficulty of hiring critical positions, and experienced a true understanding of the emotional and mental stresses associated with the pandemic.

Despite these serious challenges, I remain hopeful because through this adversity, I see the strength, resiliency, and commitment in the eyes of our employees who understand the significance and importance of providing our students not only a world-class education, but also an environment where students are safe physically, mentally, and emotionally. And herein lies the balance... providing a safe environment for our students and employees while also ensuring that as a school district, we are in tune with our students' emotional and mental health. The effects of this pandemic are real and as such, striking the appropriate balance between physical, mental, emotional, and academic health is paramount.

As Superintendent, I am blessed to receive input from families and the community through email, phone calls, and conversations. I do not take the input of others lightly because I believe when we partner together through dialogue, positive change can occur. With those thoughts squarely on my mind, I must also look at data in order to make decisions during such unprecedented times.

Last year, according to the Department of Health, there were 1,907 positive cases of COVID-19 in our schools. The 1,907 positive cases generated 10,871 quarantines as a result of contact tracing. Of those quarantines, 130 individuals – or 1.3% - became COVID-positive. The data showed last year the spread in schools was minimal. We also went a step further and investigated the timelines involved with the 10,871 quarantine events. Notification of positive COVID-19 cases from the Department of Health to the school district, due to no fault of their own, lagged last school year. As a result, on average, individuals were notified to quarantine six (6) days from their date of last exposure to a positive case. That means these students were in school, without a mask, during this timeframe and yet the spread in the schools was still minimal. This data, along with guidance received from the Florida Department of Health and Department of Education, informed our thought process coming into the current school year.

I am thankful that transmission rates in schools remained low last year with protocols in place to protect students, teachers and staff. This year, the Delta variant has presented serious challenges to our schools, just as it has across Florida and our nation. With this being the case, safety protocols such as cleaning and disinfecting classrooms and frequently touched areas, providing hand sanitizer in classrooms, on buses and in common areas, adhering to contact tracing and quarantines rules, suspending indoor large group gatherings, limiting individuals who may enter the school building, emphasizing consistent and proper handwashing, recommending masks, and providing desk barriers for students upon request are several measures that are currently in place in Okaloosa Schools. Additionally, we are implementing several added protocols such as monitoring and directing student movement in hallways and between classes to minimize contact, replacing A/C filters more frequently, ensuring students use

hand sanitizer upon entering and exiting school buses, scheduling set times for handwashing, increasing the space between students during meal times, disinfecting desks and tables between classes, and establishing voluntary COVID-19 testing sites and vaccination clinics. Our full list of protocols and our COVID-19 informational dashboard can be accessed on OkaloosaSchools.com.

So, how are we doing in Okaloosa after five weeks of school? The straightforward answer is... this has been a tough start to the school year. It is true cases this year are outpacing those of last year; however, the data does not suggest transmission in schools is occurring at a high rate. Through September 7th, we have a total of 1,250 confirmed positive cases (4.09% of our total student population) with 7,463 quarantined students. Of those quarantined, 147 students or 1.97% of the quarantined population, have become positive. While I would love to see zero positive cases in our buildings, the data suggests transmission in schools is occurring at a low rate.

Our goal as we started off this year was to learn from last year's data and strive to keep healthy students in school. Last year, the effects of quarantine impacted our students academically, mentally, socially and athletically. The unnecessary quarantining of students is what we are trying to eliminate. I want our schools to be as safe as possible with healthy students remaining in our buildings because I know full well the impact being away from school has on many of our students. Despite the challenges presented by the Delta variant, I believe we can, and we must, continue to prioritize student safety and learning in the classroom.

Over the course of the last 18 months, in the most difficult of times, I have witnessed the true nature and heart of this school district. That being... employees, families and the community rallying together in an effort to make a difference in the lives of students. From teachers delivering meals to students in need to bus drivers consoling an anxious child. From administrators working countless hours to ensure parents receive timely feedback to custodians cleaning an entire school due to limited staff. From health techs and nurses providing care to students and employees to district staff covering teachers' classes. From parents delivering goodie bags to schools to the community providing school supplies for students. I could not be more proud of the many heroic efforts and selfless gestures.

So, six weeks into what I would describe as a challenging start to the school year, I thank our parents and families, students, school district employees and community members for the questions asked, support given, input provided, and reassurance so freely communicated. More challenges surely lie ahead, so as we move forward, our school district will continue to place the health and safety of our students as the priority, while also attending to their mental, emotional and academic needs. As Superintendent, I value your input and will maintain open communication with the community. Okaloosa County Schools will continue to examine the data and focus on a balanced approach that emphasizes student safety and success.