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Governor Northam Shares Guidance for Phased Reopening of PreK-12 Schools

Back to school plan informed by collaborative process, outlines steps for safely resuming in-person instruction and school activities

RICHMOND—Governor Ralph Northam today announced a phased approach that allows Virginia schools to slowly resume in-person classes for summer school and the coming academic year. The K-12 phased reopening plan was developed by the Office of the Secretary of Education, Virginia Department of Health, and the Virginia Department of Education and is informed by guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

All PreK-12 schools in Virginia will be required to deliver new instruction to students for the 2020-2021 academic year, regardless of the operational status of school buildings. The PreK-12 guidance is aligned with the phases outlined in the [Forward Virginia](#) blueprint and provides opportunities for school divisions to begin offering in-person instruction to specific student groups.

“Closing our schools was a necessary step to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and protect the health and safety of staff, students, and our communities,” **said Governor Northam.** “Our schools have risen to the occasion and found ways to provide remote learning opportunities, keep students engaged, continue serving meals for children who otherwise would have gone hungry, and support students and families through an immensely challenging time. Resuming in-person instruction is a high priority, but we must do so in a safe, responsible, and equitable manner that minimizes the risk of exposure to the virus and meets the needs of the Virginia students who have been disproportionately impacted by lost classroom time.”

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) convened numerous and diverse stakeholders through the Return to School Recovery Task Force, the Accreditation Task Force, and the Continuity for Learning Task Force this spring to inform strategies for reopening. Secretary of

Education Atif Qarni held 35 strategy sessions with diverse groups of education stakeholders between May 29 and June 8 to gather their recommendations on how different reopening scenarios would impact their respective roles. The Secretary and his team engaged 800 individuals in these conversations, and heard from a wide range of perspectives including English language learners, parents of students with special needs, career and technical education centers, early childhood educators, students, school nutrition workers, private school leaders, bus drivers, school psychologists, the Virginia High School League, counselors, nurses, and more.

“These plans are informed by a range of perspectives and will help ensure that we prioritize the social emotional well-being of all of our students, their families, and educators as we go back to school this summer and fall,” **said Secretary Qarni.** “In-person learning is most essential for special education students, English language learners, young children, and other vulnerable students who depend upon the structure, in-person connection, and resources our school communities provide.”

Local school divisions will have discretion on how to operationalize within each phase and may choose to offer more limited in-person options than the phase permits, if local public health conditions necessitate. Entry into each phase is dependent on public health gating criteria, corresponding with the Forward Virginia plan. School divisions will have flexibility to implement plans based on the needs of their localities, within the parameters of the Commonwealth’s guidance.

The opportunities for in-person instruction in each phase are as follows:

- **Phase One:** special education programs and child care for working families
- **Phase Two:** Phase One plus preschool through third grade students, English learners, and summer camps in school buildings
- **Phase Three:** all students may receive in-person instruction as can be accommodated with strict social distancing measures in place, which may require alternative schedules that blend in-person and remote learning for students
- **Beyond Phase Three:** divisions will resume “new-normal” operations under future guidance

Beginning with Phase Two, local divisions and private schools must submit plans to the Virginia Department of Education that include policies and procedures for implementing Virginia Department of Health and CDC mitigation strategies. State Health Commissioner M. Norman Oliver, MD, MA has issued an [Order of Public Health Emergency](#) that requires all Virginia PreK-12 public and private schools to develop plans that demonstrate adherence to public health guidance. Public schools must also outline plans to offer new instruction to all students regardless of operational status.

Detailed information on each phase can be found in the guidance document available [here](#).

VDOE has also developed comprehensive guidance to aid schools in planning for a return to in-person instruction and activities. “Recover, Redesign, Restart” can be found [here](#).

“School will be open for all students next year, but instruction will look different,” **said Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. James Lane**. “The phased, hybrid approach allows PreK-12 students to have valuable class time and face-to-face interaction with their peers, while prioritizing health and safety by ensuring physical distancing measures are maintained. This plan keeps equity at the forefront by giving divisions the opportunity to deliver in-person instruction to those who need it the most.”

In every phase, PreK-12 schools must follow CDC Guidance for Schools, including social and physical distancing, enhanced health and hygiene procedures, cleaning and disinfecting measures, and other mitigation strategies. These precautions include, but are not limited to:

- Daily health screenings of students and staff
- Providing remote learning exceptions and teleworking for students and staff who are at a higher risk of severe illness
- The use of cloth face coverings by staff when at least six feet physical distancing cannot be maintained
- Encouraging the use of face coverings in students, as developmentally appropriate, in settings where physical distancing cannot be maintained

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