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Dr. Salmon Governor's Press Conference Remarks 6.10.2020

Thank you Governor for your continued leadership. Today I am excited and optimistic to share some positive news about moving education forward in Maryland. In light of the encouraging data we have seen in recent weeks that allowed the Governor to move the State into stage two of the Roadmap to Recovery, the education community has been able to move alongside the rest of the State.

School systems will now be able to bring small groups of students and staff into school buildings for summer school programming. After consultation with leading public health experts, that would mean having between 10-15 individuals maximum at a time in rooms within school buildings.

Students with the most intense learning needs are the ones that have been hit the hardest by the pandemic, and without an intense focus on these students they would be among the last to recover.

Therefore, I strongly encourage local school systems to focus any return to school buildings for summer instruction on those that have been most deeply impacted by the pandemic or those that have struggled with distance learning.

This likely includes younger children, students who are the farthest behind academically, students who lack the capacity to work independently, and students without the proper resources to participate in distance learning effectively.

Long-standing gaps in educational opportunity and access have been further exposed and widened during this COVID-19 crisis. Now is the time for school systems to engage their equity plans. This is required by a regulation that I recommended and that was passed by the State Board of Education, so that these groups of students are our first priority in the recovery plan for Maryland education.

It is incumbent upon State and local leaders in education to maintain the emphasis on equity and action for those most affected by current events.

Additionally, all nonpublic special education schools may reopen to serve students with disabilities. These schools may begin bringing small groups of children back into their buildings under the same capacity parameters as public school systems. As one of the first programs to reopen following extended school closures, Maryland's nonpublic special education schools may develop a model for replication across the State during this recovery period.

This reopening allows for instruction to many students with disabilities through an alternative service delivery model, including opportunities for face-to-face instruction. Eligible programs that opt to reopen will need to develop a recovery plan aligned with the new service delivery system. This plan will require thoughtful planning and intentional collaboration from all parties to ensure the continuum of teaching and learning and the smooth transition of students returning to a physical school building. Health and safety protocols and procedures that are in accordance with State guidelines must be addressed prior to reopening.

In the coming days as we move forward with the state's recovery, all child care providers may reopen as long as they follow the health department protocols listed on the MSDE website and also adhere to class size restrictions.

We are expanding the number of individuals that child care providers can have in one room to a maximum of 15 total. This will assist both providers and members of the community as many parents and families return to work.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, local school systems and MSDE have consistently maintained student access to nutritious meals with more than 13 million meals served since the start of school closures. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has extended several waivers through the end of summer to include non-congregate meals, meal service time flexibility and allowing parents and guardians to pick up meals on behalf of their children.

As we transition to a more familiar and routine Summer Meal Service Program, the level of operation including number and types of meals served, as well as number of locations, is a local decision. MSDE is incredibly grateful for the hard work and effort of our local food service personnel and their operations teams.

My team at the State Department of Education continues to collect feedback from the stakeholders and local districts on items for inclusion within the Maryland Together: Recovery Plan for Education. A significant portion of the updated plan includes recommendations and options that can be implemented in local school systems within our now stage two.

The revised plan, which has been posted on the MSDE website last night, includes several requirements that school systems must follow as they begin to return students and staff back into the buildings.

Each school system must establish a local stakeholder recovery group that is representative of their schools and the community, and their equity plans need to be reflected through their recovery plans. Systems and schools must determine where their students are instructionally, identify the gaps in learning, and prepare a path for instructional success and recovery. The Maryland College and Career Ready Standards and all state frameworks for each content area must continue to be followed. A system must also be in place to track student attendance and engagement in distance learning activities.

Local school systems also must be following federal provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, as well as all health and safety protocols developed by MSDE and the Maryland Department of Health for daily cleaning and collection of materials, as well as procedures for if a student or staff member tests positive for COVID.

The safe transportation of students is also critically important, and the State's recovery plan outlines a number of vital steps to assist school systems as they make decisions on how to provide transportation to students in this current environment.

School systems are currently in the process of working through and releasing their plans for summer learning opportunities. All local recovery plans for what stage three would look like in the fall will come later in the summer with an outline from the school system on how they are going to communicate the information in their plans to the community. MSDE will be reviewing each to ensure that they meet the requirements outlined in the State's education recovery plan.

Finally, I am announcing today that outdoor high school sports may resume practice and training activities within the same guidelines that were previously announced for youth sports programs by the Governor in May. Any and all sporting activities must align with the health and safety parameters outlined by MSDE and local school systems, some of which are detailed out in our education recovery plan.

As the unprecedented 2019-2020 school year draws to a conclusion, I want to first congratulate all of our high school graduates who are graduating or have already graduated. It has been very heartfelt to see the different ways that local systems are honoring our seniors – from parades on the Boardwalk to outdoor ceremonies. I want to congratulate and thank these students, because they will be the ones who will carry us forward and deal with the issues that we are currently facing in the future.

Thank you to the superintendents, administrators, teachers, school support staff, child care providers, parents and all other members of the community who have stepped up in these remarkable times to do their best to keep our children safe, engaged, and learning.

I am eager to work with all of those in the community to move education forward in the coming months, stronger than ever before. Thank you very much.