

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Schools open to aid students

By Joe Callahan

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Most of Marion County's elementary schools will open on July 13 to offer in-person classes to students who were disconnected, and fell behind, during distance learning when schools were shuttered for nine weeks due to COVID-19.

Marion County Public Schools statistics show that 47% of students struggled in at least one subject during online classes, or what is called distance learning, during the final nine weeks of the 2019-20 school year.

Gov. Ron DeSantis shut down schools for the school year on March 13 and ordered school

districts to teach children online.

Officials say that parents will be contacted.

"This is invitation only," said Kevin Christian, school district spokesman.

Originally, the district was going to have a soft re-opening at the 10 schools that receive federal Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant. The five elementary schools were: Emerald Shores, Evergreen, Oakcrest, Evergreen, South Ocala and Sunrise. The five middle schools were: Bellevue, Howard, Lake Weir, Liberty and Osceola.

On Wednesday, officials clarified that most, if not all, of the district's 31 elementary schools

will have in-person classes for students who fell behind.

The district will also offer in-person classes to incoming sixth graders and incoming ninth graders; therefore, most every campus will have at least one grade level attending classes for three weeks in July.

School district officials have dubbed the three-week summer recovery program "Liftoff 2020." School Board Chairman Eric Cummings said late Wednesday that all students who fell behind will have equal opportunities.

School district documents state that Liftoff 2020 will have

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Kristin Welcome helps a student with his work in a VPK summer class at Maplewood Elementary School in 2018. This year only a limited number of pre-kindergarten students were allowed in in-person classes because of COVID-19. Marion County Public Schools will kick off summer instruction in-person on July 13. [OCALA STAR-BANNER/FILE]

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an “academic and socialization focus, while also practicing for general opening in the fall.”

Funding for the program will be paid from a pot of money called the Governor's Emergency Educational Relief, or GEER, funds.

Courses will be provided from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., Monday through Thursday, beginning July 13. The program will end on July 30. The local school district will open all schools for the 2020-21 school year on Aug. 10.

“This will be a great practice for a fall return,” said Jennifer Beck, the local school district's director of elementary education.

The main purpose of the classes is to “close the achievement gap by developing and implementing a summer program to address the effect coronavirus has had on our students with significant academic needs,” according to a document provided to local board members.

The program will focus in three subject areas: language arts, math and science. Breakfast and lunch provided at all sites, with boxed meals that students will eat in the classroom. There will only be 12 children allowed in each classroom.

School officials said that all health and safety guidelines handed down by the state Department of Education will be followed.

School administrators will contact parents of students who will be invited to attend. The program will focus on students who were disconnected during distance learning and have a significant academic need for remediation.

At a recent Marion

County School Board work session, members debated the biggest concern: transportation.

If 6-foot social distancing guidelines are to be met, the district could only seat about 10 students per bus, or about 15% of capacity. That would make transporting thousands of kids to schools very time consuming and costly.

The board decided to allow buses to be near capacity: two students per seat, not three, and recommend that students wear a mask while riding the bus.

However, board members said parents, who must provide the mask, can choose to send children to school without one.

Board member Nancy Stacy believes that children wearing masks to school could create a larger health risk. Stacy noted that small children will touch, drop and throw the masks, thus prompting teachers and other students to be more exposed.

“Those will be falling off and the teachers will be having to handle them to help them to get them back on ... this is a whole other thing,” Stacy said.

Hand sanitizing stations will be on each bus for children to use, though officials are trying to figure out the safest possible way to provide those stations on a bus. There is a concern that hand sanitizer will drip on the bus and cause a slipping hazard.

The School District will hold discussions in July to finalize a plan for the 2020-21 school opening on Aug. 10. Officials want to make sure that parents know exactly what to expect when schools open and how schools will operate.

Board member Beth McCall said “we have to get these kids back in school.”

“That has to be our main

objective,” McCall said. “We must be safe, but I think if the parents want them to wear a mask, send them with a mask. I truly believe this is the best option (two students to a seat) and I know those buses will be sanitized on a daily basis.”

Board members Nancy Thrower, Kelly King and Cummings also agreed with two students per seat and that parents should provide masks. Cummings said the state recommends cloth masks.

Meanwhile, Marion Technical College will open July 13 for the fall semester, with social distancing guidelines in place. The college teaches such courses as barbering, nursing, welding and more.

“It comes down to providing a safe school environment for the students,” said Mike Kelly, director of the college known as MTC.

He said MTC was one of few technical colleges in the state that allowed students to complete their spring courses and certifications. Kelly said the biggest priority is educating students and employees with health and safety protocols.

Kelly said class sizes did not have to be adjusted because enrollment is usually fewer than 15 students per classroom. MTC will recommend, not require, students to wear masks. However, masks will be required for close contact hands-on instruction.

Superintendent of Schools Heidi Maier told board members that it is important to note that MTC's students are adults, who pay tuition, and are not high school students.

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