



TO: Board of Trustees
FROM: Kris Cosca, Superintendent
DATE: October 6, 2020
RE: Discussion/Action: Return to Flexible In-Person Learning Recommendation

Board Priority/Goal

1. Student Success
2. Staff Success
3. Community Engagement

Objective

To discuss and receive Board approval for a plan to return students to in-person learning for the 2020-2021 school year

Background

On March 13, 2020, Novato Unified School District transitioned to distance learning due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and has remained in distance learning since that time. This represents a monumental shift for our staff, students, and families. In March, NUSD made a commitment to bring students back to on campus learning, when it is safe to do so in partnership with local public health, and following guidance from all our public health agencies.

Our staff has done a tremendous job of making adjustments to distance learning, providing devices to all students, working with families to provide internet access where it was lacking, and feeding our children. Our staff have poured their hearts and souls into making the distance learning model the best it can be for those in their charge.

In spite of this tremendous effort, some students and families are not achieving the desired goal through distance learning. For many students, this isolation is causing mental health challenges. For others, learning is not progressing as needed.

While we are proud of the work we have done during distance learning and the growth we have seen in our teaching staff, distance learning makes it difficult to meet the unique learning needs of our students. This is more profound for our students in special education, English learners, students living in poverty, our youngest students, those with 504 plans, and students with countless other needs. NUSD continues to refine and improve our ability to provide high quality instruction in distance learning even as we work tirelessly to return our students to on campus learning.



Since March, we have developed multiple models to return students to on campus learning. Unfortunately, each of these models was undone by changing guidance on the part of either the Centers for Disease Control, California Department of Public Health, or Marin County Public Health. This constantly evolving guidance has been necessary due to the changing understanding of COVID-19. Unfortunately, this changing guidance, even while understandable and necessary, has often come as we were prepared to roll out new reentry plans. These delays have caused growing frustration within segments of our community whether that segment believes our best approach would be to keep students in distance learning or to bring our students back to school. Staff understands our community's frustration over the changes and delays that have resulted from this changing guidance.

Returning students to campus is a complex task with significant ramifications for our students, staff, and community. Returning students to campus must be done safely. This is a heavy burden we all carry. We must also balance this with our acknowledgement that, while distance learning is working well for many, it is not working well for many others. There are students and families for whom distance learning is failing or at least coming up short, and there is now clear public health guidance regarding this return.

Over the past several months, the ever-changing guidance has coalesced into guiding documents which allowed us to design this recommended plan. One of those documents is the [COVID-19 and Reopening In-Person Learning Framework for K-12 Schools in California, 2020-2021 School Year](#).

Prior to implementing any plan, NUSD is required to complete 30-point School Site Specific Protection Plans (SSSPP) for each site. These plans will be reviewed and approved by Marin County Public Health. A template of the plan can be found [here](#). Further, administrative walk-throughs of school sites to assess compliance with the SSSPPs are being completed.

These safety plans include items such as:

- Requirement to follow public health orders
- Having clear health and safety protocols in place
- Identifying two points of contact for Public Health
- Health screening protocols
- Clear communication protocols for potential scenarios of exposure of positive COVID cases
- Forward facing student desks with appropriate spacing between students and other students and students and teachers
- Campus entry and exit maps with clear protocols for drop off and pick up
- Strategies for staggered student movement when feasible
- Techniques to minimize congregate student movement in hallways (one-way traffic flow or walking lanes)
- Prohibiting large gatherings (e.g. assemblies)



- Maximizing the use of outdoor learning spaces as much as possible
- Maximizing fresh airflow in classrooms and opening doors and windows as much as possible
- Limiting the sharing of equipment and cleaning between uses when necessary
- Routines for handwashing at pre-determined intervals
- Heightened cleaning expectations for our campuses
- Required use of face coverings as prescribed
- Limiting campus access to essential workers

Here is a list of some of the other actions NUSD has taken over the past several months:

- Developed and trained staff on enhanced cleaning procedures in all classrooms
- Purchased electrostatic disinfectant sprayers for all sites to support daily cleaning
- Added three custodial positions to ensure all sites can perform enhanced cleaning
- Purchased personal protective equipment for all classrooms and student/staff spaces including but not limited to hand sanitizer, cloth and disposable masks, gloves, face shields, wipes, disinfectant and more
- Added stand up and wall mounted hand sanitizer stations around campuses
- Increased filter capacity of our heating ventilation and air conditioning units to MERV 13 where possible
- Purchased air purifiers with HEPA Filters for all classrooms where MERV 13 filtration is not possible
- Arranged classrooms with approximately 6 feet between desks for our initial return of students to campus (not less than 5 feet and 6 inches)
- Installed plexi-glass barriers in high traffic public areas including offices, libraries, counselor offices, etc.
- Purchased 2,000, three sided barriers for use when physical distancing is not practicable (for example counselors, 1:1 assessment, etc.)

With all of this as background, the NUSD Board of Trustees has asked staff for a recommendation on how we can safely return students to campus consistent with public health guidance and with a focus on returning those students who are struggling the most to access learning through distance learning.

This plan must include:

- **What are the criteria allowing us to consider returning children to campus?**
- **What would pause this return plan?**
- **What would send a cohort or classroom back to distance learning?**
- **What would send a school back to distance learning?**
- **What would send the district back to distance learning?**
- **What are the recommended dates for students to return to campus?**



- **What is the rationale for deciding which students will return when?**

This plan, at this time, does not include bell schedules for the different school levels or the specifics of what the instructional day will look like. As recently shared, we continue to negotiate with our teachers on a return of students to our campuses. While we are disappointed with Novato Federation of Teachers (NFT) failure to ratify our tentative agreement regarding the memorandum of understanding (MOU) that was mutually negotiated in good faith, we will continue to negotiate collaboratively towards an MOU. At the same time, staff has developed multiple models regarding what instruction could look like. Some of these models were developed internally and others were developed based upon the MOUs of neighboring districts. Each of these will align with either the tentative agreement that Novato Federation of Teachers (NFT) failed to ratify or the collective bargaining agreement between NUSD and NFT.

It is important to note that none of this discussion impacts NUSD's Virtual Learning Academy (VLA) which all NUSD families had the option of joining. Families can still request transfers and will be honored if possible.

What are the criteria allowing us to consider returning children to campus?

Any determination to bring students back to campus must be aligned with the [California Blueprint for a Safer Economy](#). This blueprint includes four tiers and NUSD can only return students to campus once Marin County is in the Red Tier. Marin County is currently in the Red Tier, meaning that the county-wide Adjusted Case Rate is less than 7 positive cases per 100,000 county residents and that the testing positivity rate is less than 8%. We currently meet the requirements to bring students back to campus.

What would pause this return plan?

As outlined in the [COVID-19 and Reopening In-Person Learning Framework for K-12 Schools in California, 2020-2021 School Year](#) (California's COVID-19 Reopening Plan), if Marin County were to move from the Red Tier back to the Purple Tier, NUSD would be forced to pause the reentry plan. The plan, and accompanying timelines, would remain paused until two weeks after Marin County returned to the Red Tier. However, students who are on campus at the time of Marin County's move to the Purple Tier would remain in the on-campus learning model. Those in distance learning would remain in distance learning. Timelines would be adjusted accordingly.

What would send a cohort or classroom back to distance learning?

As outlined in California's COVID-19 Reopening Plan, a cohort or classroom would return to distance learning if there was a confirmed COVID-19 infection in the cohort. In this case, NUSD would inform Marin County Public Health, isolate the positive case and exclude them from school for 10 days after symptom onset or positive test date. A cohort who had contact with the infected person would shift to distance learning for 14 days. Contact tracing would occur, and the classroom and other primary spaces used by the infected person would be disinfected and cleaned. Marin County has developed



["Marin County Public Health Protocols for the Onset of Symptoms, Potential Exposure to and/or Close Contact with an Individual Testing Positive for COVID-19 in a School/Classroom Setting"](#) and we follow these protocols.

What would send a school back to distance learning?

As outlined in California's COVID-19 Reopening Plan, it would be recommended that an entire school return to distance learning based upon the number of cases, the percentage of the teacher/students/staff that are positive for COVID-19, and following consultation with the Local Health Officer. Individual school closure may be appropriate when there are multiple cases in multiple cohorts at a school or when at least 5% of the total number of teachers/students/ staff are cases within a 14-day period, depending on the size and physical layout of the school. The Local Health Officer may also determine school closure is warranted for other reasons, including results from public health investigation or other local epidemiological data. This decision would be made in partnership with or by order of public health.

What would send the district back to distance learning?

As outlined in California's COVID-19 Reopening Plan, NUSD would return the entire district back to distance learning if 25% or more of schools in the district have closed due to COVID-19 within 14 days. This determination would be made in consultation with the local public health department.

What are the recommended dates for students to return to campus?

Phase	Date	Students Returning
1	October 26	Elementary Special Day Classes, Social Cognition Classes, Early Intervention, Transitional Kindergarten, and Kindergarten (TK-K)
2	November 9	First grade, second grade (1-2)
3	November 30	Third, fourth, fifth and sixth grades (3-6)
4	January 4	Seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth grades (7-10)
5	January 11	Eleventh and twelfth grades (11-12)

The return of these students to campus will look different depending upon the grade level or program. For self-contained Special Education classes or programs serving cohorts of 16 or fewer, it is recommended the entire class will return to campus. For the varying grades, return would likely have approximately half of any class on campus at any given time during this transitional period. Again, the exact path forward will be determined through negotiations with NFT or by NUSD administrative staff should we not be able to get to a negotiated agreement within a reasonable timeline.

Why are we not returning any students to campus until October 26?

As shared in a recent end of week communication, the determination was made that we were not quite ready to begin our staggered return on October 5. We are committed to only returning to



campus when our campuses are ready.

Getting our campuses ready is a complicated task. I noted three areas where staff learned our campuses were not quite ready. Those areas were student flow around campuses, bathroom utilization and air filtration and purification. The first two topics could have been corrected in advance of October 5. Air filtration and purification presented a larger challenge that we could simply not correct in the given time. Given the recent poor air quality, ongoing fires, the fact that we continue to be in the middle of the fire season, and knowing that winter is right not too far off, we did not believe we could simply count on keeping windows and doors open to provide appropriate ventilation and air purification. In advance of this timeline for returning students to campus, we will address the air filtration and purification in each of our classroom spaces.

What is the rationale for deciding which students will return when?

It is difficult to accurately determine who is struggling the most during distance instruction or to make this decision within an equity lens. Knowing this, staff looked to research and to the extensive experience of our strong and diverse team on the developmental appropriateness of distance learning on students at differing ages and with differing abilities.

Why our Special Education students first?

Research indicates that students in our Elementary Special Day Classes, TK-12 Social Cognition Classes, and students in the Early Intervention Program are most likely to struggle during distance learning. These students receive additional services that are very difficult to provide via distance learning. Each of these classes or programs is made up of 16 or fewer students that naturally create their own small cohort with limited interactions outside of that cohort.

Why our youngest students first?

Distance instruction is not developmentally appropriate for our four and five-year olds and the younger students served in the Early Intervention Program. While staff is doing their best, this is not the most appropriate way for these students to learn. Our youngest students need the most support and care as they transition to campuses that most of them do not know or understand. Learning campus and classroom routines in the absence of other students will serve these students well. TK-3 classes are fully enrolled at 24 with the average class size being a little more than 20 and 4-5 grade classes are fully enrolled at 30 with the average class size being approximately 28. By breaking these classes into two cohorts, we can allow these students to have in person instruction with their teacher that many students are sorely needing while staying in smaller cohorts.

Why are you waiting to bring back middle and high school students?

When we developed master schedules for our middle and high school students, we had to make some critical decisions. The first was, do we want to keep students in cohorts of 30 throughout their school day? By doing this, we would allow students to stay in small cohorts throughout the day and



have teachers rotate around to the students and teach them in one classroom. This would dramatically decrease the number of potential contacts a student had in each day. Unfortunately, this would also mean that we could not as easily meet student needs, would not be providing student choice, and that we would put our students in tracks that would not meet their individual needs. For example, all the highest performing students would be in one cohort, the middle of the road students in another cohort and our lowest performing students in another cohort. This is troubling all on its own. It would also mean that administrators would either pick the elective for each cohort or that administrators would eliminate electives entirely. As educators we know that tracking students is bad for students. We asked ourselves questions like, how do we handle a student who is great at math but who faces challenges in English, or who performs highly in science, but struggles with history? What cohort would they be placed into? We also know that, for many students, the reason they show up at school is because of their electives.

In the end, we agreed to move away from small cohorts and tracking in our secondary programs. We allowed students to sign up for their middle school electives and advanced placement courses, career pathways, MSA, STEM, AVID, AFJROTC, etc. at the high schools.

While this is the best decision for students, this comes with complications. Since we broke from the cohort model, we increased the number of students each child and each teacher comes into contact with on a given day. Knowing this, and the research on the ability of these students to access learning in the distance learning model, we determined our secondary students could be successfully served in this model through the first semester.

Then why are you suggesting bringing back the sixth graders?

Our sixth graders are used to being on a school campus wherein they show up at one classroom and stay with that teacher all day. They know all the ins and outs of their campuses and know the processes and procedures of these campuses.

As they transition to the middle school campus, everything changes. They have multiple teachers in various classrooms around the campus. Not only will they need to figure out a new campus and all of the new routines, but they will be restricted by one-way routing around the campus. Staff believes these sixth graders would benefit from three weeks on campus without the seventh and eighth grade students who will readily adapt to these changes following Winter Break.

Research is clear that one of the critical data points in determining if a student will graduate from high school is receiving an F in sixth grade. Our sixth grade students need some time to transition back to school in a sheltered way that will support them.

Why are you waiting until after semester break to bring back high school students?

Some of this rationale was shared above as it pertains to middle and high school students. One additional complication for NUSD as it pertains to our high school students is the 4x4 model that



was selected for our students.

When the Reentry Task Force made the decision to adopt a 4x4 model (where students take four condensed year-long courses each semester), we did so because we knew it would allow students to take the courses they are most interested in and would be most helpful to them in finding future success in life.

We also knew it would come with complications. As our teachers have moved through the 4x4 model, they are realizing how intense it is. In addition, our imbalanced semesters make this more challenging in the fall semester.

Our fall semester has 79 student days while our spring semester has 101 days. The schedule is built this way for many reasons. First, it has been informally determined that we do not start the school year any earlier than the third week of August. Second, we end the first semester prior to winter break, and we do this for several reasons. If we ended the semester after winter break, many students would spend their entire break studying to prepare for the finals that would occur soon after. Other students will have a winter break slide so that their final assessments will not show what they are truly capable of. Finally, when semesters end following winter break, instructional days are lost to reviewing content taught in advance of the break.

NUSD has imbalanced semesters. This has typically not been a challenge for the vast majority of classes as they are typically taught over the course of a year with the semester break being an opportune time to check in on progress. In the 4x4 model, this is the final opportunity to assess student learning. We acknowledge that any transition from distance learning to on-campus learning will impact teaching time and staff believes we do not have that time to give during the first semester. With this in mind, staff recommends not returning our high school students to on campus learning until the second semester.

Along with this recommended plan for returning students to flexible on campus learning, schools are working towards bringing other groups of students back to campuses to meet varying needs.

Funding Source/Cost

N/A. While there are extensive costs associated with returning student to flexible in-person learning, those costs have been approved through other Board actions.

Recommendation

The Superintendent and staff recommend approval of this Return to Flexible In-Person Learning Plan.

Supporting Document(s)

- Return to Flexible In-Person Learning Presentation