



July 20, 2020

Since the start of the pandemic, dozens of district personnel have worked diligently to respond to the impact COVID-19 was having in our community. We've worked alongside public health officials; school and district leaders from our region, our state and from around the country; and we've consulted regularly with other state leaders to offer guidance and seek advice for what we're seeing here in Dougherty County.

We are acutely aware of what is at stake in terms of the impact of how and when we open our schools. As a former small business owner, I am sensitive to the possibility that some businesses might be negatively impacted if their employees have to stay home with children who would ordinarily be in school. But we're also painfully aware of the impact of this virus, having grieved the loss of three employees and mourned alongside nearly 20 others who lost grandparents, parents, spouses and siblings, making up a portion of the nearly 160 deaths our community has suffered to-date. Despite the devastating impact of the COVID-19 virus, we are not operating in fear.

We are using data and science to inform our planning and decision-making. Armed with information from a variety of sources, we formed five committees tasked with developing a restart plan that balanced our strong desire to return to in-person, on-campus instruction with our mandate and responsibility to keep our students and employees safe. I believe that, arguably, our plan is one of the best thought out and among the most thorough in the country.

Schools, however, are not protected bubbles, immune to the impact of their surroundings. **Despite the effectiveness of our plan to provide for the safety of students and employees while they are at school, other external factors impact efforts to ensure a reasonable degree of safety.** The rate of community spread, access to testing, turnaround time to get test results and the timeliness of contact tracing are some of the external factors that impact overall safety efforts.

After the initial onslaught of the virus in our community in March and April, our efforts to slow the spread and flatten the curve showed results. For 37 consecutive days (from May 28th until July 3rd), the seven-day moving average of new daily cases was in the single digits. Since July 4th, however, the seven-day moving average of new daily cases has been in the double digits. Although access to testing in our community is widespread, the increased demand for testing statewide has caused a lag in processing. As a result, the turnaround time for receiving test results from the third-party labs has more than doubled. This lag in getting test results has a negative impact on the effectiveness of contact tracing.

By now, you've hopefully seen our plan and you know that, at its core, it's conditions-based and allows the district the flexibility to pivot based on the spread of the virus in our community, as well as the significant external factors discussed above.

We are continuously reviewing the Harvard Global Health Institute's Covid Risk Levels Dashboard, Georgia Tech's COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning tool as well as data from the Department of Public Health to track how COVID-19 is moving through our neighborhoods. **Based on multiple data sources, COVID-19 cases continue to rise in both Dougherty County and Southwest Georgia, and the state as a whole.**

Additionally we surveyed parents and employees to get their input and feedback. That data was not only used to help develop our plans and scenarios but they also show the care and concern a broad cross section of our community has with returning to on-campus instruction when the virus remains so active.

I personally believe that we have a collective responsibility to do whatever we can, whenever we can to slow the spread of this virus. That is why, taking a multitude of factors into consideration, including concerns as a parent, employer and a former small business owner, I am making a recommendation to the Dougherty County Board of Education that we amend the district calendar to push the start of school from its original Aug. 3 start date in order to allow the curve to flatten and the trend line for COVID-19 cases in Dougherty County to reverse.

My recommendation, that will be considered by the Dougherty County Board of Education at its July 29th meeting, is that all students will begin in the online instructional model with rolling start dates:

- **High School Students: August 17**
- **Middle School Students: August 24**
- **Elementary Students (Grades PK-5): August 31**

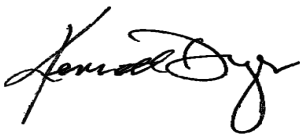
This option will allow for device distribution and for teachers and staff to properly connect with students via online orientation. We will share information about dates and times for distribution by the end of the week.

Open House will take place virtually. Students in transitional grades -- Pre-K, Kindergarten, 6th grade and 9th grade -- will have Open House by appointment only. More information is forthcoming on how to set up your appointment.

We will continue to evaluate the data daily to determine when an on-campus restart is both prudent and safe for our students and employees.

Our community is no stranger to adversity. When challenges arise, we respond. I'm confident that if we work together and continue to listen to the science -- **wear your masks while out in public, wash your hands frequently, avoid crowds and practice social distancing** -- we can get COVID-19 under control and return our students to where we all believe they need to be: in the classroom.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kenneth Dyer', written in a cursive style.

Kenneth Dyer
Superintendent