

Cape Schools Open Minds and Open Doors

Community • Academics • Passion • Ethics

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Public Hearing of the FY21 School Board Budget

To Members of the Town Council:

Certainly, the world is different than when we engaged in the development of the FY21 School Budget. Since the beginning of budget development, we have had to create a preventative plan for school prior to the pandemic, we have had to create a plan for moving to remote learning, we have had to create a plan for closing school, and now we are faced with the daunting task of creating a plan for educating our students in the fall. However, we don't have to create just one plan, we have to create several, one for continued remote learning, one for a hybrid model that combines in school learning and remote learning, and a plan for having everyone come back into our buildings in the fall. We will implement one of these plans as we start school, the challenge is that we really don't know which one. We also know that in all likelihood we may start with one plan and then have to switch to another, on a day's notice. As Dr. Fauci stated, "The virus will make the decision for us."

The last thing that Cumberland County Superintendents were told by the Commissioner of Education, about a month ago, was that the combined efforts of the Governor, the DOE, and the CDC would open our school's region by region. She told us that due to the number of cases in Cumberland County we would probably be one of the last regions to open. We have not heard anything since, although we have asked continually if this is still the plan.

A flow chart was released by CDC "to assist administrators in making (re)opening" decisions regarding K-12 schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. It begins by asking 3 questions:

1. Will reopening be consistent with applicable state and local orders?
2. Is the school ready to protect children and employees at higher risk for severe illness?
3. Are you able to screen students and employees upon arrival for symptoms and history of exposure?

If we answer No to any of these questions we are strongly advised not to open.

If we answer Yes to all 3 questions we move on to the next question:

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Are recommended health and safety actions in place? Those safety actions are, according to the flow chart:

1. Promote healthy hygiene practices such as hand washing and employees wearing a cloth face covering, as feasible.
2. Intensify cleaning, disinfection, and ventilation.
3. Encourage social distancing through increased spacing, small groups and limited mixing between groups, if feasible.

If we can comply with those actions, we are urged to move to another set of questions. If we are not able to comply, it is recommended that we meet these safeguards before moving forward with reopening.

Moving through these questions presents significant budgetary challenges to school districts, to *our* school district.

In order to thoroughly screen students, we would need to not only interview each student upon entering school, but also take each student's temperature. We would need to buy disposable thermometers for each student, for every day that they entered school.

We also would need to provide face masks to all staff members and possibly to all students. Some teachers of special education students would require clear face masks, as would speech and language pathologists. Classroom teachers of these special education students would also be required to wear clear face masks, which we would need to provide.

Disinfecting rooms between classes, should students change classes, would be required, and if students attend schools in staggered sessions, which is a strong possibility, thorough cleaning between shifts, such as morning and afternoon sessions, would be required.

In order to ensure the social distancing requirements of the CDC suggested 6 feet, classes would have to be split into two or three groups. This could be accomplished by adding staff for coverage, if we could even do this with the space we currently have, or by creating split session scenarios, where $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{3}$ the class would meet at a time.

Social distancing recommendations would require 1 student to a seat on buses. This would necessitate additional bus runs, straining our gas budget and requiring us to hire full time bus drivers in place of the part time drivers that we now have in our FY21 budget. Split sessions would also require additional bus runs as one group of students might come in the morning and another in the afternoon. Even having students attend on alternate days would require more bus runs to comply with social distancing guidelines.

Recently, we conducted a very general [survey](#) asking parents if they preferred 100% remote learning, 100% in classrooms, or a hybrid of in school and remote learning. In almost every case 80-90% of parents preferred either 100% in class, or a hybrid. Parents want their students in our schools and we want them

there as well. In a DrummondWoodsum webinar on the impact of *Covid on Labor Issues* last Thursday, one of the presenting attorneys stated that in working with local businesses who were making decisions regarding opening, the number one consideration was the K-12 school openings. Parents need schools to open in order to return to work.

However, in order to bring students back into our schools safely, it will be costly. On Friday I completed an order for face masks and face shields for all staff that should last through mid to late October, and one mask for each student. I ordered clear masks for teachers of some special education students, and shields for some of those teachers as well. The order totaled \$7,890. Should we be legally required to purchase masks for students, the cost will be considerably more, just for that short period.

Bussing costs, PPE costs, cleaning costs; Bringing our students and staff safely back into our buildings will be costly, but it is what parents want and it is what we want.

We could ask to increase the school budget in order to cover these costs, however the school board has a strong desire to be sensitive to the needs and limitations of our taxpayers. Instead my recommendation has been to go back into the budget, analyze the proposed expenditures and try to absorb the costs that COVID-19 has presented within our current proposal. In reviewing the budget, administration has discussed ways to absorb the costs, not to ask for a budget increase.

One step that will be taken is to leave many of the positions that were in the proposed budget unfilled. This will result in larger class sizes than are proposed in Board Policy Guidelines and will impact the attention teachers are able to give individual students in their classes. There are some positions that we have no choice in filling in order to be compliant with state mandates that are still in effect. Administrators will continue to engage in discussions around positions that will have to remain vacant. We will also look at co and extracurricular opportunities that we offer our students, and at all expenditures that are requested by teachers and staff to run our schools.

At this point we don't know what mandates there will be, if any. What we do know is that any plans that we make could change for the next day. We need to be prepared for several different scenarios. What we do know is that we want our staff and students back in school, our parents want our students back in school, and we do know that that will be costly.

In addition to the added bussing and equipment we will need to purchase to open schools, we will need to keep our eyes on a curtailment. At this point we have received no information regarding this possibility. The legislature is not scheduled to come back into session until January, unless the Governor calls them back early, and they would need to approve any changes in school funding. It could be February or later until we receive any word.

Initial steps to prepare for curtailment will be scrutinizing expenditures and not filling open and new positions unless absolutely necessary. Next steps might be asking bargaining units to open negotiations regarding furloughing. If things get even more dire, we may have to look at layoffs. These are steps that we must be prepared to face as we proceed through the year.

No doubt it is going to be a difficult year. Clearly, we want, and parents need, our students back in our schools. Clearly this is going to be costly. Cutting the school budget could have a serious impact on ability to get our students back to school.

Thank you for your attention to this challenge.

Sincerely,

Donna H. Wolfrom