

# PRESS RELEASE

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Portage Area School District  
Eric A. Zelanko, Superintendent of Schools



## Reopening of the 2020-2021 School Year

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned all of our world's upside down. We all long for a return of things we took for granted prior to the onset of this terrible disease. From being able to go shopping wherever and whenever we want to seeing our children safely return to school, the spread of the virus is paramount in all of our minds. Since the day after graduation, my team and I have focused on the opening of the 2020-2021 school year. It has not been an easy task as the safety of our students and staff is our first priority. We've done our best to adhere to the guidance we've received from the CDC, the PA Department of Health, the PA Department of Education, and our governor. It's been a challenge as the orders, mandates, and recommendations change on an almost daily basis.

On August 10th, the state released new data and recommendations that forced us to change our plans for the school year. Rather than the traditional return of students, we are being asked to change directions with very short notice with the recommendation we institute a blended hybrid learning environment to maintain a six-foot social distance in classrooms. This came as disappointing news to many members of our school community. After five months away from school, students, staff, and parents looked forward to the safe return of everyone to the school buildings. To adjust to this new recommendation, the school district pushed back the start of the school year for students to September 8<sup>th</sup>. We apologize for this delay and inconvenience but quite simply, it's taking us some time to adjust to this new learning model.

Despite our best efforts to educate students remotely last spring, our students missed out on valuable teaching and learning. Knowing that time is impossible to replace, we are making every effort to avoid a similar scenario from occurring this school year. We're employing many tactics to assure student learning goals are met. I'd like to share a few of those with you now.

To begin, your school district has taken steps to permit our youngest students to be educated five days per week at school. With the physical size of classrooms being the greatest barrier to social distancing, we have suspended some programs and reassigned staff to meet the social distancing mandates. A full-time temporary teacher has also been hired to help alleviate class sizes. Desks in the classrooms of our students in Grades K thru 8 will be six feet apart and will be equipped with our desktop shields as an added safety measure.

With certification issues limiting our ability to do something similar in the high school, we have been forced to take more drastic measures for our older students, those in Grades 9-12. These students will have a combination of traditional face to face classroom instruction and on-line,

remote instruction. Students in each of these grade levels are being split with one group of students coming to school on GREEN days and the other group coming on WHITE days. Those students not in the building will be expected to participate in class from home using Microsoft Teams. Essentially, the students working remotely will be receiving the same instruction as their peers in the building. Basically, the only difference between the groups will be their physical location. Whether a student is sitting in a classroom or at home, they'll see, hear and participate in the same instruction.

On Wednesday afternoon, all students will participate in remote learning. This instruction will allow all of our students regardless of grade level to learn to use remote learning in the event we are forced to close our buildings due to the virus.

Not all parents will be comfortable sending their child back to our buildings out of concerns over the virus. For those parents, we are providing the option that students may receive their education from home all five days of the week regardless of their grade level. Like the remote learning that will be conducted for our students in grades 9 thru 12, students can participate in their classes as if they were sitting in an actual desk in the school building. Students will have the ability to interact with their teacher no differently than those students in the classroom.

Over the next couple of weeks, we will be reaching out to each household to survey your choice to educate your child. I've posted our latest Health and Safety plan along with a document addressing frequently asked questions on the district's web site. I encourage you to review those documents in making your decision. If you have any further questions, please feel free to reach out to our building principals. They'll be happy to assist you in any way possible.

In concluding, please know your school district is doing everything it can to protect the health and safety of our students.