

BOARD AGENDA ITEM

November 14, 2023

SUBJECT:

Update of Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

On March 11, 2021, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act was signed into law. As part of ARP, the U. S. Department of Education is providing an additional \$121.9 billion for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER III Fund). This legislation is awarding grants to state educational agencies, including the S. C. Department of Education, to provide local educational agencies, including Aiken County Public Schools, with emergency relief funds to address the impact of COVID-19 on elementary and secondary schools across the nation.

ADMINISTRATIVE CONSIDERATION:

A component of ARP is a requirement that school districts develop a plan for return to in-person instruction and update the plan every six months. The District has requested stakeholder and community input on its Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan as part of the school district's fulfillment of requirements related to the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act. The updated plan represents changes to District COVID-19 protocols that have occurred following the approval of the updated plan in May of 2023.

RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the school district's updated Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan.

ATTACHMENT:

Updated Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan.

PREPARED BY:

Jennifer Hart

November 2023 Update:

On March 11, 2021, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act was signed into law. Through this legislation, the U.S. Department of Education allocated 121.9 billion for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER III Fund) through September of 2024, of which 2.2 billion was allocated to South Carolina, with 63.4 million allocated to Aiken County Public Schools. One requirement of this legislation is for school districts to develop a plan for the safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services and update the plan regularly – at a minimum every six months – with the input of stakeholders.

For the remainder of the 2023-2024 school year, Aiken County Public Schools will continue to offer in-person, five-day instruction as well as a full-time virtual program for middle and high school students.

The district also plans to continue its designation as an eLearning district, as approved by the SC Department of Education, for unforeseen interruptions and approved weather make-up days.

The district will also continue to work with federal and state agencies, local physicians, and other partners to determine criteria and guidelines for the safe operations of our schools.

Specifics of the plan are included within this document.



2023-24 RETURN TO IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION AND CONTINUITY OF SERVICES PLAN

OVERVIEW: *A district's plan must include how it will maintain the health and safety of students, educators, and other school and Local Education Agency (LEA) staff, and the extent to which it has adopted policies or practices and a description of any such policies or practices, on each of the CDC's safety recommendations including: universal and correct wearing of masks; modifying facilities to allow for physical distancing (e.g., use of cohorts/podding); hand washing and respiratory etiquette; cleaning and maintaining healthy facilities, including improving ventilation; contact tracing in combination with isolation and quarantine, in collaboration with the state, local, territorial, or Tribal departments; diagnostic and screening testing; efforts to provide vaccinations to educators, other staff, and students, if eligible; appropriate accommodations for children with disabilities with respect to health and safety policies or practices; and coordination with state and local health officials.*

1. Description of Maintaining Health and Safety

Keeping students and staff physically and emotionally safe is the number one priority of Aiken County Public Schools (ACPSD). The traditional 5-day, face-to-face schedule adheres to the current guidelines from CDC, DHEC, and SDE to the greatest extent possible. The current guidelines strongly recommend social distancing when possible, preventative health measures, and frequent cleaning of high touch surfaces (door handles, handrails, light switches, etc.).

Health & Safety Protocols for Staff

1. The Nursing Supervisor will ensure that all school nurses remain abreast of the symptoms that could indicate COVID-19 as the CDC and DHEC update these symptoms.
2. All employees should screen for any COVID-related symptoms prior to leaving for work each day. If employees exhibit symptoms that are related to COVID-19, they should not report to work and should notify their supervisor as soon as possible.
3. Employees are encouraged to practice social distancing to the extent possible.
4. Employees should avoid touching their faces and wash their hands thoroughly and often with soap and water for 20 seconds. In the absence of water, sanitize regularly.

5. Before and after eating, employees should wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water.
6. Schools should continue to promote common disease prevention strategies.
7. Custodians will implement enhanced health and safety protocols for cleaning and disinfecting surfaces in shared areas.

2. Universal and Correct Wearing of Masks

After considering Governor McMaster's Executive Order to lift the mask mandate in South Carolina's public schools and State Superintendent Spearman's rescission of her mask policy, ACPSD has determined that masks will be optional for faculty, staff, and students in our school buildings or on school buses.

3. Modifying Facilities to Allow for Physical Distancing (e.g., use of cohort/podding)

The school district will monitor cases of COVID-19 and will respond accordingly if the need arises to reinstitute strict social distancing protocols. All classrooms will have hand sanitizer and Morning Mist disinfectant available for staff to sanitize desks. Classroom doors will remain closed and locked during instructional periods. Teachers will be responsible for opening and closing doors when students enter or leave class.

Water fountains will remain closed for use. Students will be encouraged to bring a water bottle to school; bottle fillers have been installed in each location. Schools will have protocols in place for students to refill water bottles and for students who do not bring bottles to have access to water.

4. Handwashing and Respiratory Etiquette

It is recommended that children (and adults) wash their hands routinely and thoroughly throughout the day, particularly before eating, after using the restroom, and after hands are soiled or dirtied. There is no specific recommendation on the frequency or intervals of hand washing. Proper hand hygiene consists of washing hands thoroughly and often with soap and water for a minimum of 20 seconds. When hand washing is unavailable, students should use hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol. Hand sanitizing stations will be available in classrooms and hallways.

All persons are encouraged, regardless of presumed cause, to cover their nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing. Adults and students should also use tissues to contain respiratory secretions and dispose of these tissues in the nearest trash can after use. All persons should wash their hands immediately after contact with possible respiratory secretions and contaminated

objects/materials.

5. Cleaning and Maintaining Healthy Facilities, Including Improving Ventilation

Custodians will disinfect high touch surfaces in schools throughout the day with the product HALT. These surfaces will include but not be limited to doorknobs, panic bars, counter tops, sink handles, and toilet and urinal handles. Student desks will be disinfected once per day by custodians with a clean cotton towel and HALT. Classrooms with tile floors will be swept and spot-mopped daily and completely mopped twice weekly. Classrooms with carpet floors must be vacuumed and spot cleaned for spills daily. Teachers will also continue to be supplied with Morning Mist for daily disinfection of their workspaces.

In schools that will continue to eat lunch in classrooms, custodians will assist with distributing rolling trash cans from the cafeteria throughout the school each day prior to lunch. Classroom trash cans must be emptied after lunch daily. Student desktops will be disinfected by custodians with HALT prior to the end of each day.

Aiken County Schools has an ongoing initiative to improve indoor air quality. The school district contracted with an independent air quality specialist to survey all District HVAC systems to determine the feasibility of installing needlepoint bipolar ionization devices. For the 2023-2024 school year, every building and learning space in ACPSD has been upgraded with the AtmosAir indoor air purification system. This system has significantly reduced airborne particles and provided our staff and students with greatly improved air quality by reducing odors, bacteria, mold, mildew, and allergens.

Aiken County Public Schools has incorporated the guidelines from the SC State Department of Transportation (SCDOT), CDC, and DHEC to ensure the health and safety of our students during bus transportation to and from school. Each bus will be cleaned and disinfected using approved disinfectant after completion of each route. Cleaning protocols require drivers to wipe down frequently touched surfaces with disinfectant, including those in the entrance touched by passengers, such as handrails and seat tops as well as those surfaces contacted by the driver (steering wheel, door opening device, etc.).

6. Contact Tracing in Combination with Isolation and Quarantine

Aiken County Public Schools follows the recommendations of SC DHEC in accordance with the published School and Childcare Exclusion List. School nurses are updated by the nursing supervisor when the exclusion list changes.

Isolation: School nurses and administrators exclude students and staff who test positive for COVID-19 in accordance with the current isolation criteria. Positive employee cases are reported to the district office COVID Team electronically using an established Microsoft Form link for district tracking.

Outbreak Reporting: For classrooms or cohorts with five or more people, Aiken County Public Schools is required to notify DHEC if 20% or more of the students and/or staff within the classroom or cohort (e.g., sports team or extracurricular group) are absent or sent home early within 72 hours of each other due to testing positive for COVID-19 or having symptoms of a respiratory illness (oral temperature of > 100 with a cough and/or sore throat). Outbreaks meeting this definition will be reported to DHEC by the school nurse in consultation with the nursing supervisor.

Contact Tracing: Contact tracing and quarantines following exposure to a positive case have ended. SC DHEC refers districts to the CDC Operational Guidance for K-12 Schools when considering prevention strategies.

7. Diagnostic and Screening Testing

Aiken County Schools currently does not participate in on-site diagnostic or screening testing.

8. Efforts to Provide Vaccinations to Educators, Other Staff, and Students, if Eligible:

Aiken County Public Schools provided opportunities for school district staff in the following phases:

Phase 1A: Employees eligible in Phase 1A were reported to Aiken Regional Medical Centers (ARMC) in January 2021, and provided an opportunity to be vaccinated if desired at an ARMC clinic.

Phase 1B: Vaccine clinics for all school staff were held at six high schools during the months of March 2021 (dose 1) and April 2021 (dose 2) in partnership with Rural Health Services.

Subsequently, Aiken County Public Schools encourages staff and parents of eligible students to consider vaccination opportunities that are offered at a variety of locations throughout the community.

9. Appropriate Accommodations for Children with Disabilities with Respect to Health and Safety Policies and Practices

Guidance and training will be ongoing as it relates to the continued provision of health and safety regarding accommodations for children with disabilities. Guidance will be issued, and training will be extended to relevant staff based on current CDC and DHEC guidance.

The Department of Special Programs will assist school teams with understanding how to help prevent the transmission of COVID-19 within their classrooms and therapy areas while supporting students with disabilities. In addition, considerations to help special education teams plan for the continuity of teaching and learning services if there is a case of COVID-19 identified within their classroom or therapy area will be provided.

Each teacher, therapist, and staff member will be reminded regularly to adhere to the following health and safety protocols:

- Wash hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
- Remember to supervise students when they use hand sanitizer to prevent ingesting alcohol.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces.
- Cover cough and sneezes with a tissue and dispose of tissue immediately and wash or sanitize hands.

Support Hand Hygiene and Respiratory Etiquette with students by doing the following:

- Teach and reinforce handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and increase monitoring to ensure adherence among students.
 - If soap and water are not readily available, hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol can be used (for staff and older children who can safely use hand sanitizer).
- Encourage students to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue. Used tissues should be thrown in the trash and hands washed immediately with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
 - If soap and water are not readily available, hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol can be used (for staff and older children who can safely use hand sanitizer).

The District and school teams strongly request that sick children and staff stay home through:

- Communicating to parents the importance of keeping children home when they are sick.
- Communicating to staff the importance of being vigilant for symptoms and staying in touch with school administration if or when they start to feel sick.
- Adhering to established procedures within school facilities to ensure students and staff who come to school sick or become sick while at school are sent home as soon as possible.
- Keeping sick students and staff separate from well students and staff until they can be sent home.
- Having a plan if someone is or becomes sick.
 - Provide an isolated place for sick students (sick room).
 - Follow school district guidelines on how to disinfect classrooms and therapy areas.
 - Have readily available contact information in the event a student or staff member becomes sick or has COVID-19 symptoms or will need to be quarantined.

Intensify cleaning and disinfection efforts:

- Develop a schedule for cleaning and disinfecting classrooms, restrooms/changing areas,

equipment, supplies, etc.

- Routinely clean, sanitize, and disinfect surfaces and objects that are frequently touched, especially toys and games. This may also include cleaning objects/surfaces not ordinarily cleaned daily such as doorknobs, light switches, classroom sink handles, countertops, desks, chairs, cubbies, and playground structures. Note: The most effective method for disinfecting is to lightly spray the surface and allow a minimum of 10 minutes for drying time.
- Ensure cleaning materials are kept secure and out of reach of children.
- Ensure there is adequate ventilation when using these products to prevent children from inhaling toxic fumes.

Clean and Sanitize Assistive Technology Devices and Therapy Equipment

- Items that cannot be cleaned and sanitized should not be used.
- Items that children have placed in their mouths or that are otherwise contaminated by body secretions or excretions should be set aside until they are cleaned by hand by a person wearing gloves.
- Provide individual/personal materials for frequently used items.
- Instructional items that can be divided, counters, blocks, books, manipulatives, etc. Will be put in individual “work boxes” for students to reduce sharing/contact of toys and materials. Those materials can then be sanitized and rotated weekly if needed.
- Workstations and centers will be sanitized as students rotate stations.
- Establish a bin or container to separate all materials that have been in a student’s mouth, sneezed on, or otherwise contaminated until they can be sanitized appropriately.
- Maintain individual seating. Label seats and table spaces so students will have their own chair.
- Any schedules, teaching tools, token systems, picture exchange systems, circle or large group manipulatives, or other materials will be laminated for ease in disinfecting.
- Items will not be shared as much as possible.

Toileting

When completing toileting needs for a student, staff and students will wash hands immediately following. Staff members will wear gloves when completing toileting tasks. Staff members will follow health and safety protocols as follows:

- Preparing (includes putting on gloves)
- Cleaning the student
- Removing trash (soiled diaper and wipes)
- Replacing undergarment
- Washing student’s hands
- Cleaning up toileting station
- Washing hands

Feeding a Student

It is important to continue addressing the feeding needs of our students while ensuring their safety and care. To the extent possible, when feeding students:

- Staff will utilize gloves when feeding students. Hands will be washed prior to feeding students.
- Staff will wash hands, neck, and anywhere touched by a student's secretions.

Vulnerable/High Risk Groups

Based on currently available information, it appears older adults and people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions might be at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19. To protect those at higher risk, it is important that everyone practices healthy hygiene behaviors.

- Staff who have students who have underlying health conditions should discuss care plans and specific ways to address health and safety needs of students.

10. Coordination with State and Local Health Officials

The nursing supervisor serves as the liaison between Aiken County Public Schools and the DHEC Midlands Epidemiology team. In the absence of the nursing supervisor, a member of the Human Resources COVID team is designated to serve in this capacity.

OVERVIEW: *A district's plan must describe how it will ensure continuity of services, including but not limited to services to address students' academic needs and students' and staff social, emotional, mental health and other needs, which may include student health and food services.*

11. District response on continuity of services:

Aiken County Public Schools plans to ensure continuity of quality academic instruction by providing the option of face-to-face instruction five days per week or full-time virtual instruction for grades 6-12 through AIKEN INNOVATE, the District's full-time virtual program, which began in the 2021-2022 school year. The school system's new academic calendar allows for intersession weeks each nine weeks. This intensive support allows for one week of intersession in both fall and spring semesters. Intentional and targeted academic support will allow remedial and enrichment opportunities beyond regular academic offerings, including afterschool and on Saturdays. This valuable time will be especially advantageous for students who have fallen behind or need intensive review to master ELA and/or Math grade level standards.

If a school or schools must be temporarily closed due to illness or exposure, students will participate in virtual instruction through Schoology, the District's learning management system, and Teams, the District's virtual meeting tool. Students who are enrolled in VirtualSC courses will

participate through Moodle. Students who participate in 4K Child Development classrooms or HeadStart or Early Head Start programs will receive instruction through hard copy packets and/or through a Teams virtual classroom.

Social, emotional, and mental health services will be provided through universal supports in those areas through SEL-focused curriculum at each level. Counseling services will be available to students as well as staff through school-based counselors and an employee assistance program. The district will continue to provide targeted supports for students who have experienced trauma or who have significant needs through school counselors, special programs counselors, or mental health counselors.

The District will ensure availability and accessibility of breakfast and lunch meals for any student wishing to receive on normal school days and during summer programming. Full-time virtual students will have the option of picking up “to go” style meals at school sites. When/if necessary, in-school dining arrangements will be modified to ensure social distancing. In the event of food service staffing shortages at a site(s) due to illness or other factors, food service employees may be shifted from other sites to adequately staff each location. The District is also working with a temporary staffing company to assist in meeting staffing needs. In extreme situations, other school or District staff could be mobilized to assist in non-food prep capacities.

In the event of COVID-related school or district closures, meals will be available to students on any scheduled, instructional day. Meals would not be provided on teacher workdays, weekends, or holidays.

OVERVIEW: *Districts are required to review and, as appropriate, revise their Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan at least every six months through ARP ESSER conclusion in September 30, 2024, including seeking public input and taking such input into account in determining whether to revise the plan and, if revisions are determined necessary, on the revisions it makes to its plan. If a district developed a plan prior to enactment of the ARP Act that was made publicly available and was developed with public comment but does not address each of the required aspects of safety established in the ARP Act, the district must, as part of the required periodic review, revise its plan consistent with the ARP Act requirements no later than six months after it last reviewed its plan.*

12. District Response on Ensuring Periodic Updates to its Plan

According to the South Carolina State Department of Education, all school districts were provided with district-specific grant funding award information on May 24, 2021. A school district must have requested and received public input and have publicly posted its Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan by no later than June 24, 2021, with scheduled, comprehensive reviews of its plan every six months.

Aiken County Public Schools will solicit public input during a regularly-scheduled and/or special

called board meeting and post plan revisions (if needed) by the following dates:

November 24, 2021

May 24, 2022

November 24, 2022

May 24, 2023

November 24, 2023

May 24, 2024

OVERVIEW: *The ARP Act requires that school districts make their Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan available to the public online and that the plans be in an understandable and uniform format; to the extent practicable, are written in a language that parents can understand or, if not practicable, orally translated; and upon request by a parent who is an individual with a disability, provided in an alternative format accessible to that parent. Before making its plan publicly available, school districts must seek public comment on the plan and develop the plan after considering public comment.*

13. District response on public input in development of its plan:

Aiken County Public Schools made a DRAFT copy of the school district's Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan available to all stakeholders and area media outlets on its website on Monday, November 6, 2023.

District stakeholders had the opportunity to provide feedback and input on the District's plan. These avenues include, but were not limited to, during the regular meeting of the Aiken County Board of Education on Tuesday, November 14, 2023, as well as by submitting input e-mailed directly to communications@acpsd.net.

The school district's Communications Department gathered public input and stakeholder feedback through Tuesday, November 14, 2023. Input and feedback was used to make any necessary revisions/updates to the plan for its submission to the Aiken County Board of Education during its regular meeting Tuesday, November 14, 2023, beginning at 6:00 p.m. The school board reviewed the school district's Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan at that time with a recommendation by District administration for approval.

The plan was submitted to the S.C. Department of Education and posted to the ACPSD website prior to November 24, 2023, in accordance with State guidelines.

Similar actions to the above are anticipated, with modifications if needed, for future submissions.

