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Dept. of Education Announces Virtual and In-Person Hybrid Beginning Jan. 2021; Students From 4th-12th Grade to Continue Virtual-Only Setup

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The V.I. Dept. of Education announced Wednesday its hybrid learning plan beginning in January 2021, though the setup sees most students remaining in the 100 percent virtual learning environment while a minority of students begin in-person instruction.

Part of the reason for the hybrid which still tilts heavily to virtual learning is because D.O.E. lacks the resources to implement a model that facilitates more on-campus learning. "The sooner we receive all the resources necessary to keep everyone safe, and reduce the rising [Covid-19] numbers in the territory, the sooner all students will be able to physically return to school," said Carlos McGregor, St. Croix superintendent of schools.

St. Thomas-St. John District

- Students in grades Pre-K, K and 1st grade will return to in-person learning two days per week beginning January 25, 2021.
- 2nd and 3rd grade students will return to in-person learning two days per week beginning February 1, 2021.
- Special Education students in self-contained classrooms will return on January 5 for five days per week
- Second-year technical education students will return on January 25 for five days per week.
- All grades not mentioned will continue 100 percent virtual learning.

"Teachers will be provided with time to properly closeout the semester and make the physical move back to school during the week of January 18-22, 2021," said St. Thomas-St. John District Superintendent of Schools Stefan Jurgen. He said students returning to school on a hybrid model will be assigned to a cohort and will receive two consecutive days of learning on campus with the teacher present, and three days of virtual learning.

Wednesday, which is one of the virtual learning days, will be used to deep-clean classrooms, said Mr. Jurgen. He said deep cleaning will also take place at the end of the week.

St. Croix District

All students enrolled in Pre-K through 3rd grade, Special Education self-contained classrooms, and second-year career and technical education students will physically return to school buildings, D.O.E. said.

- Pre-K through 1st grade students will return the week of January 25, 2021.
- Second and 3rd grade students will return the week of February 1, 2021,
- Special Education self-contained classrooms, and second-year career and technical education students will return the week of January 25, 2021.

"These students will report to their campuses full-time, five days a week," said Mr. McGregory.

He said 4th-12th grade students who learn in general education settings will continue learning from home," adding that the Dept. of Education would continue evaluating options for a safe return to in-person learning in 2021.

School schedules will remain the same in the second semester.

Covid-19 safety measures

- All students will be required to wear a mask (on campus, while waiting on a school bus at the bus stop, and while in the school bus).
- Employees working with students are also required to wear face masks and other appropriate personal protective equipment.
- Temperature checks will be conducted daily when students, faculty and staff arrive on campus.

- Hand sanitizer stations will be available in every classroom, and hand-washing stations will be strategically placed throughout campus.
- Students will be seated in socially-distanced layouts in classrooms in accordance with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines.
- School buses will carry less than half of their capacity each pickup. "We're asking for parents to please assist. If you can bring your child to and from school, we ask you to help us and do so," said Mr. McGregor. He said D.O.E. has purchased signage to be erected at the schools for familiarity of protocols.

The "No Child Goes Hungry" program will continue to provide meals for students on campus and those learning virtually.

The Arthur A. Richards K-8 School will be housed at the St. Croix Educational Complex if the modular campus is not ready to receive students by the start of the second semester, said Mr. McGregor.

Additionally, Mr. McGregor said the St. Croix District will continue its distribution of Chromebook laptops, "resulting in every student receiving a device."

Students who will be returning to in-person learning will still use digital platforms currently being used in the all-virtual setup, the superintendent said.

Teachers whose students are set to participate in in-person learning on St. Croix will be given an opportunity to prepare their classrooms prior to the commencement of on-campus learning, Mr. McGregor said. Additionally, opening orientation will be held for parents, "as schools will look and feel very different when teachers and students return."

In the first two weeks for students returning to on-campus learning on St. Croix, elementary schools will facilitate a staggered return so that students could get acquainted with the school buildings, said Mr. McGregor.

"This will allow students to practice the logistics of social distancing, temperature checks, meal distribution and other aspects of campus life to ensure compliance, efficiency and safety," he said.

Dept. of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin during her opening remarks said learning will never be the same, calling it a "new era" of instruction. "There's no going back to what was, it's only forward movement, and despite the learning curve we all are experiencing, we should all be inspired that we are here at this juncture," she said.