

July 7, 2020

Dear Members of the School Board of Alachua County,

I am writing on behalf of 37 parents and University of Florida professors in response to the DRAFT ACPS Continuity of Operations (Reopening) Plan. We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments and feedback on the plan based on our roles as scientists, parents, and members of the community. Re-opening our schools in a way that best protects students, staff, and families is no doubt one of the biggest challenges that the members of this board have faced. We appreciate that no plan will satisfy everyone nor reduce risk to zero, even with the most stringent protections.

Unfortunately, the draft re-opening plan fails to meet this tremendous challenge on two primary fronts. First, the plan includes very little substantive, evidence-based prevention strategies for mitigating the likely spread of COVID-19 in schools (i.e., mandatory masks, ventilation/air sanitization, staggered schedules, and/or outdoor classrooms). Second, the fact that the plan was taken, almost in its entirety, from a plan published by the state of Georgia without any attribution or acknowledgement of its source, and framed as a plan developed by Alachua County Public Schools¹, is a failure of leadership and ethics that merits dismissal of the Superintendent and an apology to the community. While not the primary topic of this letter, misrepresenting the plan as a comprehensive product of the ACPS¹ has further strained relationships with the community at a time when we must come together to meet this unprecedented challenge.

The remainder of this letter addresses the substance of the draft plan, with recommendations and feedback specific to four major themes: masks and ventilation/air sanitization, physical distancing, disruptions to educational continuity, and the use of surveys as a basis for re-opening.

1. Masks

- Masks should be required of all students, staff, faculty, visitors, contractors, and anyone else who enters school buildings.
 - 53.8% of parents (English-language survey²) and 79.5% of parents (Spanish-language survey³) “support” or “completely support” students and employees wearing masks.
 - Scientific evidence strongly supports that using face masks and cloth face coverings could result in a large reduction in risk of infection and community spread.^{4,5,6,7}

¹From <https://www.sbac.edu/Page/30007>: “After reviewing return-to-school plans from districts around Florida and other states, surveying families and staff, consulting with local healthcare professionals and reviewing guidance from the Florida Department of Education, Alachua County Public Schools has developed a DRAFT plan for the reopening of schools in the fall of 2020.”

²<https://fl02219191.schoolwires.net/cms/lib/FL02219191/Centricity/domain/42/covid%2019/Parent%20Survey.pdf>;

³<https://fl02219191.schoolwires.net/cms/lib/FL02219191/Centricity/domain/42/covid%2019/Parent%20Survey%20Spanish.pdf>

⁴Chu, D.K., Akl, E.A., Duda, S., Solo, K., Yaacoub, S., Schünemann, H.J., El-harakeh, A., Bognanni, A., Lotfi, T., Loeb, M. and Hajizadeh, A., 2020. Physical distancing, face masks, and eye protection to prevent person-to-person transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet*.

⁵Lyu, W. and Wehby, G.L., 2020. Community Use of Face Masks And COVID-19: Evidence From A Natural Experiment Of State Mandates In The US: Study examines impact on COVID-19 growth rates associated with state government mandates requiring face mask use in public. *Health Affairs*, pp.10-1377.

⁶Cheng, V.C., Wong, S.C., Chuang, V.W., So, S.Y., Chen, J.H., Sridhar, S., To, K.K., Chan, J.F., Hung, I.F., Ho, P.L. and Yuen, K.Y., 2020. The role of community-wide wearing of face mask for control of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic due to SARS-CoV-2. *Journal of Infection*.

⁷MacIntyre, C.R. and Chughtai, A.A., 2020. A rapid systematic review of the efficacy of face masks and respirators against coronaviruses and other respiratory transmissible viruses for the community, healthcare workers and sick patients. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, p.103629.

- The CDC recommends that everyone “...wear cloth face coverings in public settings and when around people who don't live in your household, especially when other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain⁸” (as would be the case in schools).
 - Challenges to ensuring mask wearing can and must be overcome; seek guidance on how to ensure mask usage from other states/countries; note that many local summer camps have achieved mask use across all age groups.
 - Students and employees who are not comfortable wearing a mask should partake in distance-based education options.
- Masks as a primary line of defense are protective not only of students but are also critically important for protecting teachers and other school staff. Since the vast majority of infected children are asymptomatic^{9,10,11,12,13}, the only way to protect the adult educator and staff population is through consistent and mandated mask-wearing by all.
 - Reducing the infection rate in children, even if they remain asymptomatic and suffer no harm themselves, is critical for protecting parents, grandparents, and other caregivers. This is even more urgent in multi-generational families and for low-income families with relatively lower adaptive capacity to miss work and incur medical expenses.
 - A policy that only “encourages”, “expects”, and “strongly recommends” face masks¹⁴ is unacceptable and destined to fail, particularly in a school setting where children are strongly influenced by one another
 - A policy that combines masks, social distancing, and frequent disinfection is necessary; this will likely also require school day or time staggering to reduce the density of students in classrooms and common areas (see Section 2).
 - When community spread is substantially reduced, the requirement for masks could be relaxed, following CDC guidelines⁸ as they evolve.
 - In the meantime, the Board should use all available resources to investigate the feasibility of installing UV sanitization of return air handlers to reduce viral load and aerosol transport.
- 2. Physical Distancing: Staggered Days/Times and Utilizing Outdoor Space**
- With typical class sizes of 20+ students, it will be impossible to implement appropriate social distancing of six feet between students. Six feet is widely recognized as the minimum safe distance to avoid transmission of COVID-19.

⁸<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover-guidance.html>

⁹ Tagarro A, Epalza C, Santos M, et al. Screening and Severity of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Children in Madrid, Spain. *JAMA Pediatr*

¹⁰ Chan JF, Yuan S, Kok KH, et al. A familial cluster of pneumonia associated with the 2019 novel coronavirus indicating person-to-person transmission: a study of a family cluster. *Lancet* 2020; 395(10223): 514-23.

¹¹ Xu Y, Li, Xufang, et al. Characteristics of pediatric SARS-CoV-2 infection and potential evidence for persistent fecal viral shedding. *Nature Medicine*

¹² Lu X, Zhang L, Du H, et al. SARS-CoV-2 Infection in Children. *New England Journal of Medicine*

¹³ Dong Y, Mo X, Hu Y, et al. Epidemiological Characteristics of 2143 Pediatric Patients With 2019 Coronavirus Disease in China. *Pediatrics*

¹⁴<https://f102219191.schoolwires.net/cms/lib/F102219191/Centricity/Domain/42/DRAFT%20Alachua%20K-12%20Reopening%20Plan.pdf>

- In order to achieve a safe and sustainable classroom density, many countries and states are considering staggered schedules, an approach endorsed by the Florida Education Association¹⁵ and proposed for many workplaces as well.¹⁶
- The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that schools use outdoor spaces as much as possible as a front-line COVID-19 mitigation strategy.¹⁷ The layout and outdoor access of many Alachua County schools may provide an opportunity to reduce indoor student density by rotating students to outdoor classroom settings, perhaps with the aid of shade tents and fans. This option should be fully explored, and the Board should provide specific guidance to schools about how to develop indoor/outdoor education plans.

3. Disruptions to Educational Continuity

- The draft plan includes provisions for closing any school for 2 to 5 days of deep cleaning with a single confirmed COVID case. This is appropriate. However, at current incidence rates in Alachua County, and with the lax prevention measures in the draft plan, this would result in regular if not continuous disruptions to in-person teaching at every school.
- The details of what happens to ensure continuity of instruction during these closures need to be made clear, particularly given the impacts that regular unforeseen closures will have on parents requiring childcare. Just as importantly, the frequency of closures at which transitions to other modes of teaching (e.g., distance learning) would be activated to limit disruptions should be specified.

4. Survey as a basis for re-opening

- Survey results are useful, but they represent parent and teacher attitudes at a time (April 2020) when infection rates were much lower and mandatory mask and social distancing orders were in place.
 - There were 45 cases reported in Alachua County the week the survey was released; the same week there were 5,900 total cases reported across Florida. This past week (6/27 – 7/4) there were 10 times as many cases in both Alachua County (463) and the state (59,000)¹⁸.
 - With infections spiking, it is likely that many parents (and teachers) feel differently about the balance between the benefits and risks of returning to school on August 10, especially in the absence of a required mask policy and appropriate physical distancing. It is also likely that a higher proportion of respondents would support students and employees wearing masks if the survey were completed today.
- The District Advisory Council presentation on reopening¹⁹ notes that a plurality (35.8%) of respondents to the English-language survey completely support return to regular, full time

¹⁵Florida Education Association. Statewide Committee to Safely Reopen Schools: Priorities and Recommendations. June 2, 2020. <https://feaweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PreK12-Reopen-Recommendations.pdf>

¹⁶<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/11/opinion/coronavirus-reopen.html>

¹⁷American Academy of Pediatrics. COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry. June 25, 2020.

<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

¹⁸<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/7572b118dc3c48d885d1c643c195314e/>

¹⁹<https://fl02219191.schoolwires.net/cms/lib/FL02219191/Centricity/Domain/42/Planning%20for%20the%20Reopening%20of%20Schools%20Presentation.pdf>

schedule Aug. 10 “with precautions”, however the survey question specifically included face masks as part of those precautions: “...with additional safety precautions in place (face masks, hand washing protocols and frequent cleaning of school facilities)” and “...con precauciones de seguridad adicionales (máscaras faciales, protocolos de lavado de manos y limpieza frecuente de las instalaciones escolares)”.^{2,3}

- A plurality of respondents (31.6%) to the Spanish-language survey DID NOT support re-opening on August 10, with a plurality instead “completely supporting” a “combination of face-to-face and online learning” (33.3%) and “online learning until it is ‘safe’ to return” (42.1%).
- Meanwhile, the overwhelming plurality of teachers (40.8%) responded that they were “not at all comfortable” returning to school on August 10 to a regular, full-time schedule, while nearly 90% were slightly to extremely comfortable supporting distance learning.²⁰
 - It is likely that the proportion of teachers who are not comfortable returning to the classroom is higher today given the order of magnitude increase in infections.
 - Teachers will be the front-line staff enforcing distancing, masks, and disinfection policies; how is this tenable if the majority don’t even feel safe being there?

Thank you for your prompt and focused attention to these critical lapses in the draft re-opening plan. It is obvious that substantial revisions and additional work will be needed to adapt and augment this plan to the realities of our schools, teachers, students, and county. Given the plan’s shortcomings, and the lack of faith engendered by the process to date, the chances of finalizing the plan by July 15th appear to be small. If the Board seeks to move even incrementally toward consensus on this document, it is your responsibility to provide due diligence and leadership on this issue that affects everyone in our county, including by clearly outlining a well-thought-out process for moving forward to resolve each of these issues.

We look forward to your response to each of the points above.

Sincerely,
Dr. David Kaplan, Associate Professor
UF Environmental Engineering Sciences Department
Parent, (to be renamed) JJ Finley Elementary School

²⁰<https://f102219191.schoolwires.net/cms/lib/FL02219191/Centricity/domain/42/covid%2019/Teacher%20Survey.pdf>