

July 14, 2020

Dear Members of the School Board of Alachua County,

I am writing on behalf of 114 parents and University of Florida faculty and staff in response to the “Choose Your School Option” and FAQ Document released on 7/10/2020. We appreciate the efforts of District staff in providing this critical information to the community, even as new state-level guidelines and requirements are being announced. No doubt it is a tremendously challenging effort.

Many parents from our University of Florida community are seriously considering the distance-learning options due to the worsening COVID-19 situation and uncertainty regarding the safety protocols to be implemented in schools. If more families choose distance learning, it will benefit the entire ACPS community by reducing the infection risk for school employees and families who will need to rely on the brick and mortar option. However, the lack of information and communication regarding content and logistics is holding many parents back from committing to this option. The following steps are necessary in order for parents to make an informed decision:

1. **Delay school reopening until August 31** to allow more time for planning, feedback, and decision-making.
2. Either extend the deadline for parents to choose distance vs. in-person options (currently July 19th) or **guarantee that parents can change their option in response to new information.**
3. **Conduct a series of at least two participatory workshops** regarding the content and logistics of all distance-learning and in-person options to allow two-way communication between parents and district staff.
4. **Develop a detailed plan for distance-learning** that incorporates parent feedback obtained during the workshops and release it with enough time for parents to use it in their decision-making process.
5. **Address the digital divide** to ensure that children with limited access to technology do not suffer disproportionately negative education and health outcomes, per the “PETITION TO ADDRESS AND RECTIFY OUR DIGITAL DIVIDE”.
6. **Clarify teacher leave and substitute policies** to support safer re-opening.

Additional, specific suggestions on these items are listed below.

Parent, community, and expert involvement

- Parents/caregivers need a series of at least two workshops to explain and help co-develop the distance-learning options. These workshops need to be held multiple times (evening/day; weekday/weekend) and via multiple platforms (e.g., online and potentially in-person w/ proper distancing and masks, perhaps outdoors or in a large auditorium) to ensure full community participation.
- Existing platforms for communication (YouTube streams, emails) are ONE-WAY, making it impossible to collaborate and interact beyond delivering questions, which may or may not be

answered in writing or at the next one-way meeting. Workshops need to be interactive, and there are many online meeting platforms that can facilitate group discussion, breakout rooms, and polls. With adequate facilitation, these tools can be used to help build consensus and share ideas from a much broader swath of the community.

- This is a HUGE job, and the SBAC and District stand to benefit by bringing in the community and relevant experts for a facilitated, two-way workshop process.

Timelines for decision-making and educational content development

- We understand the need for an initial count of families interested in each of the three options in order to get state approval. However, when coupled with limited available information, the decision-making timeline is unrealistic.
 - It must be stated unequivocally that parents will have the ability to change options once more information is available.
- Regarding the timeline to develop educational materials, it is clear that we need to delay the start of school until at least August 31. Given the current rates of local and statewide infection, it may be necessary to begin with ALL STUDENTS online.
 - Most, if not all, teachers will need to learn how to use the new content management systems (CMS) and prepare online curriculum since repeated closures and quarantine will likely mean that all students (even those who select brick and mortar) will be home for some portion of the semester.
 - Beyond CMS training and content development, teachers will need training on trauma response, health and sanitation protocols, sick/leave policies, and how all of this affects their legal rights and responsibilities in the classroom.
 - The SBAC needs to develop, with parents and teachers, a detailed timeline and process for teacher training and content development that clearly lists the resources that will be brought to bear to achieve this and clearly identifies any gaps (e.g., funding, logistics, teacher buy-in) that need to be worked through together.

Addressing the digital divide

- We stand in strong support of the “PETITION TO ADDRESS AND RECTIFY OUR DIGITAL DIVIDE.” Ensuring access to technology is critical to current decisions about school re-opening, but it also necessary if we hope to address long-standing achievement gaps in our schools that are exacerbated by unequal access to technology.
- This will require, at minimum: 1) Wi-Fi hotspots distributed around the County; 2) devices appropriate for learning available for each student; and 3) the establishment and full support of a Digital Teaching and Learning Advisory Council.

Teacher/staff leave and substitute policies

- To better protect the health and safety of students, teachers, and staff, it is critical that SBAC work with teachers and teachers’ representatives to develop clear, fair, and legal policies on sick leave, workers compensation, and hazard pay.
- Regarding the use of substitute teachers under the current situation of rapidly increasing infections: What is the plan for ensuring a robust and healthy substitute pool? What happens

when subs are unavailable (classes can't be combined)? Will subs rotating through the county pose an added infection risk?

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

Sincerely,

Dr. David Kaplan, Associate Professor
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Parent, (to be renamed) JJ Finley Elementary School