

March 24, 2020

Greetings from the new normal. This is not how we anticipated having this board meeting, but life and board business cannot stop during a crisis. We have board members and staff participating from various locations via video conferencing. We also have a video conference set up at the Hancock Center for any community member who wishes to participate. I want to thank our technology department for figuring out the best way to conduct this meeting.

I have presented a copy of the 2020-2021 Organizational Chart. You will notice that I have not requested any additional positions in District Office. I am making an adjustment to the chart by moving the direct supervision of all athletic programs and fine arts programs under the high school and middle school principals. This is an adjustment that has been requested by both principals. It makes sense to me because all extracurricular activities occur on school campuses and involve students.

The State of Mississippi's response to the COVID-19 virus has been evolving hourly. There is no way the Governor or MDE could have known how this would impact the educational environment. I think the Governor was right to close schools through April 17. That means schools will resume on Monday, April 20 unless the closure is extended. At the State School Board meeting, Dr. Wright recommended an immediate suspension of all accountability measures. Individual departments at MDE are providing guidance specific to departments, but everyone fully acknowledges responses at the local level will by necessity have to be dependent upon resources available in communities and in school districts. There are many, many details that must be worked through and resolved to transition to a distance learning platform. MDE has been a good resource, but everyone fully admits there are no easy and perfect answers. Dr. Wright has been encouraging and supportive.

U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos announced today students impacted by school closures due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic can bypass standardized testing for the 2019-2020 school year. Upon request, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) will grant a waiver to any state that is unable to assess its students due to the ongoing national emergency, providing relief from federally mandated testing requirements for this school year.

The Mississippi State Board of Education (SBE) voted on March 19 to suspend all federal and state assessments for the 2019-20 school year and to submit a waiver request to ED for exemption of those federal requirements. They are also seeking flexibility on promotion and graduation requirements.

The MDE Office of Special Education (OSE) is serving as a resource for special education parents and educators. They fully understand the past week has been full of changes and there are many questions as we continue to work to ensure the best possible services are provided to all students. We are very concerned about our special education students. Their needs are often technical and highly specialized. Our response to the COVID-19 virus will by necessity be an individualized response. Our Special Education

department and teachers are working diligently to review approximately 1200 IEPs. We are concerned about ALL 7000 students in TPSD, including our special education students.

As we work to support our students with online learning, consideration is being given to provide district laptops to students currently enrolled in dual enrollment/credit courses. Many community colleges are communicating with their local districts about the current semester and would like to ensure students will be able to complete their classes. We have sent out a survey to all parents to identify students who need technology support at home. We do not want to just hand out 4000 chrome books because it would be logistically challenging to do while keeping everyone safe. In addition, many students have devices and computers at home. Not all students may need a chrome book. We are actively trying to determine what students need at home during this crisis.

Many of our students were preparing to take College AP exams when the schools were closed. As we navigate the unprecedented changes, we are utilizing resources provided by the College AP program. There are online resources that are available to students. Traditional face-to-face exam administrations will not take place. AP College services is going to provide the assessments in an online format. Some students may want to take the exam sooner rather than later, while the content is still fresh. Other students may want more time to practice. For each AP subject, there will be 2 different testing dates. The full exam schedule details will be on the AP website available by April 3.

Additional dates and scheduled College Board communications:

- March 20 - update on AP Central is posted online [HERE](#).
- March 23 – an update will be sent to students.
- March 25 – students will have access to **free, live AP review lessons, delivered by AP teachers from across the country**. These optional, mobile-friendly classes are designed to be used alongside work that may be given by schools.
- April 3 – the full exam schedule including the specific free-response question types that will comprise each AP exam will be published.
- April 30 – AP Coordinators should indicate all students eligible for a fee reduction in AP Registration and Ordering (APRO) if they have not already done so.

Updates on TPSD response:

- Our food delivery program is going very well. I want to thank Ms. Lynn Rodgers and her team in Food Services for getting everything set up and ready in a short period of time. We are currently having additional conversations about ways to increase our services using school buses. We are distributing sack breakfasts and lunches at Rankin, Lawndale, Lawhon, Pierce Street, and ECEC.
- Our maintenance team been cleaning every school. We have contracted with ServePro to blast every school with disinfectant. We want our students to return to the safest possible learning environment. Charles and Kirk are making sure their team is paying attention to our maintenance needs during the closure.
- Our security team is in the process of maintaining a presence at all schools during the closure. We have many students who are currently out of school. We want to make sure our facilities are protected. Officer Hatch and his team are on the job.

- The business department is working to take care of budgeting and payroll needs throughout the school closure. Mrs. Murphree and her team go into the office a few times a week and then conduct the rest of school district business from home when they can.
- Mr. Turner and his team are figuring out ways to recruit and process personnel issues throughout the closure, which includes preparing for contracts.
- As you probably imagine, Mrs. Merriweather and her team are figuring out ways to facilitate everything with technology. They have the job of not only making sure everyone has the technology to what they need to do during the closure but also knows how to use the technology. Mrs. McRae is also assisting in this challenging job.
- Gregg Ellis and the communication team with Ryan Coon and Teresa Gregory have been doing an amazing job making sure we get information out to the community as it becomes available. For example, he was able to get the announcement out about the District of Innovation designation. That was a welcomed cause for celebration in the community. I want to thank everyone who was involved in the process, but I especially want to thank Stewart McMillian. We truly would not have been able to get it done without her determination and hard work.
- Mrs. Britton and Dr. English are leading the way with the instructional team and our amazing principals to develop and deliver distance learning opportunities beginning on March 30. We are truly blessed to have such a talented group of administrators. Our principals are going to deliver a great distance delivery experience for our students. We do not want to rush the process. There is a sense of urgency, but we want to proceed with clarity and caution to make sure we have equal access for all students.

There are many, many people who are figuring out ways to continue serving as an educational resource to our community. I have only mentioned a few of the departments. I can honestly say that everyone, all hands-on deck, is doing whatever has to be done to take care of the students of TPSD.

Folks, the new normal is not going to look like the old normal. I want you to imagine what it would be like if Toyota had to completely redesign its operation to stop making cars and start making rocket ships in five days, and they had to complete the entire transition via Google Meet. There will be some classes and services that are not perfect, that do not translate well in an online format. This is not a time to lay blame at anyone's feet about who knew what when and whether or not we could have had more time to prepare. This is a time to get the job done. We all saw the COVID-19 virus coming, but we had no idea what it would mean for the K-12 environment. Things are moving very quickly and change by the hour. These are uncharted waters. Every decision is complex and deep. Think Jacques Cousteau. All employees in the Tupelo Public School District are grateful for the challenge.