State moves forward with reopening of public schools on Aug. 4

20-Jul-2020

In a joint news conference, Governor David Ige, Hawai‘i State Epidemiologist Dr. Sarah Park, Board of Education Chairperson Catherine Payne, and Hawai‘i State Department of Education Superintendent Dr. Christina Kishimoto confirmed the state’s plans to move ahead with school reopening for students on Tuesday, Aug. 4. Teachers return on Wednesday, July 29.

During a joint news conference this afternoon, Governor David Ige, Hawai‘i State Epidemiologist Dr. Sarah Park, Board of Education (BOE) Chairperson Catherine Payne, and Hawai‘i State Department of Education (HIDOE) Superintendent Dr. Christina Kishimoto confirmed the state’s plans to move ahead with school reopening for students on Tuesday, Aug. 4. Teachers return on Wednesday, July 29.

Ige cited the state’s decision to push back the pre-travel testing program to Sept. 1 as one of the reasons to move forward with HIDOE’s reopening date, stating, “We do not want to reopen our schools and receive more travelers simultaneously. A phased approach will help ensure a safe return for our students and minimize other factors that could lead to the spread of COVID-19 that we have been able to carefully manage so far.”

“The Department of Health has been working closely with the DOE on ensuring the safe reopening of schools,” said Health Director Bruce Anderson. “We will continue to work with the DOE in assisting them to ensure their staff are fully informed, response plans are in place, and safe practices and reporting protocols are ready prior to the opening of schools.”

State Epidemiologist Dr. Sarah Park said, “The planning process has followed CDC recommendations and DOH guidance on ohana bubbles, masking, and distancing variations by age. These measures will not completely eliminate possible cases, but they will reduce the risk to students and control the spread of illness in schools.”

To minimize the spread of COVID-19, DOH has advised HIDOE to use a symptom screening checklist for staff and students, which is included in HIDOE’s Return to Learn Health and Safety Handbook. The guidance reads as follows:

Help stop the spread of illness by interviewing and visually inspecting all individuals (from at least six feet away) using the following symptom checklist:

- feverish or unusually warm (has flushed cheeks)
- coughing/sneezing
- sore throat
- shortness of breath/difficulty breathing
- headache/stomachache/nausea
- muscle pain/unusual fatigue
- new loss of taste or smell

“The importance of our students’ mental health cannot be lost in this conversation. The Department’s distance learning survey findings made clear that parents have had great concern about their children’s social emotional well-being during these extended school closures,” added BOE Chairperson Catherine Payne. “School closures have caused major disruptions to learning and development, exacerbating pre-existing issues of access and equity. Last

school year, our students lost 46 in-person instructional days, and each additional day will only increase the learning gaps for our students."

As the situation evolves or as new health and safety guidance becomes available, the State will adjust plans to ensure that a safe learning and working environment is provided for students, teachers, and staff.

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