



Getting Back to School: FAQs



How will we go to school in the fall?

The Mitchell School District will resume classes with students physically in buildings on Wednesday, August 19, 2020, the first day of school. Frankly, we can hardly wait to get back to school offered the way we all know and love.

If you as a parent have concerns about sending your child back to school in the current global health situation, however, we will then offer a new, enhanced version of eLearning. (See below for an explanation of our new eLearning model.) You may sign up for this during registration events or open houses.



In the event we did have to do some eLearning, what would that look like?

Just to be clear, it is our intent to have students physically in school. That is our default position. However, should the State close schools or local conditions be such that our health care officials here recommend something similar, we would move to a new system of eLearning, unlike that we offered during the 4th quarter of 2019-20. Here's how that would be conducted:

- Students would take their computer home with them.
- Teachers would teach their regular day, **live**, and broadcast that to the students on their computer devices. Through a technology called SWIVL, teachers would hold a regular day of school, broadcasting lessons with both teacher and students live, at the same times classes would have been held in the schools. **Students would be expected to attend just as with a regular school day on that same schedule.**
- Students would be provided a common learning platform, GoogleClassroom, so that they would know each day where to go to access the live lesson, review assignments, and receive communications from their teacher.
- eLearning would be discontinued as soon as possible and students and teachers would then return to their classrooms.
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How will eLearning work with Career and Technical courses?

These courses—agriculture, welding, construction, etc.—are some of the most difficult to conduct virtually. Having said that, we have some exceptional instructors in this area and they will do their level best, employing their creativity and expertise, to provide instruction in their field in a virtual environment if students cannot attend in person.



How will the school district even know about confirmed cases of COVID-19 in our schools?

The South Dakota Department of Health will be identifying such cases and then making personal contact with the superintendent of schools or, in his absence, a designee. This will then trigger a process for responding to such situations.



What will that process look like?

We are fortunate that the SD Department of Health, an entity with vast experience with infectious disease, will be working with schools in these situations. Basically, it works like this:

- A health care provider/institution (or other person) informs the DOH, which they are required to do, of a confirmed case.
- The DOH opens an investigation.
- The DOH contacts the school district and informs the district what steps they should take in response.
- Such steps might include:
 - District notification of students, families, and staff of confirmed cases in proximity to them
 - Required isolation of confirmed cases, with eLearning provided to the student if he/she is the confirmed case.
 - Required isolation of ‘Close Contacts’ those identified by the DOH investigation as having been within 6’ of the confirmed contact for at least a sustained 15 minutes starting from 2 days before onset of symptoms.
 - Deep cleaning of affected, specific locations, within facility over and above the regular cleaning regimen.

The Mitchell School District will cooperate fully with the ongoing DOH investigations and act according to their recommendations.



Will parents be notified if there is a COVID-19 case in their child’s classroom?

Yes. As soon as we are made aware of COVID-19 positive identification, we will notify parents. Depending upon the building or program level, this may mean notifying a classroom, grade level, extracurricular program, or some other suitable group. However, personally identifiable information cannot be provided, due to privacy statutes.



If there is a positive COVID-19 case in my child’s classroom, will my child have to stay home/move to eLearning for 14 days?

Not necessarily. The South Dakota Department of Health will conduct an investigation of all COVID-19 cases in schools and prescribe a quarantine of others in the school environment who have been likely exposed to that

person, i.e. who are ‘close contacts. That doesn’t mean, however, everyone in the same classroom. It means anyone, up to 2 days before the appearance of symptoms, was within 6 feet of the diagnosed person for 15 consecutive minutes. Thus, the decision to quarantine would be on a case by case basis, as determined by SD DOH personnel.



Will parents be notified of the amount of COVID-19 cases in their child’s school?

Yes. We are still working on the means and frequency of such communication, however. That will no doubt developed at a later time.



Is there a ‘magic’ number or percentage of cases per classroom, school, or district that move a classroom, school, or district to eLearning?

While there are certain guidelines for such, the decision will actually be made in collaboration with the South Dakota Department of Health. The DOH has recommended responses for school buildings under 3 scenarios: 1) No cases in school building, 2) Isolated cases in school building, and 3) Substantial cases in school building. Even within these categories, though, the responses will vary based upon particulars of the DOH investigation. The Mitchell School District will cooperate with all such investigations and implement DOH recommendations in full.



What if social distancing requirements make it impossible for all students to be in school at the same time?

Again, the District intends to hold school with all students as our default or normal situation. If the situation demanded it, however, and we could have only some but not all students in buildings due to state or health care professional decisions, then we could very well hold school each and every day, with half of the students physically present in school and the other half attending school through the eLearning program described just above. In that event, the curriculum would be taught every day, not every other day, but with students attending lesson in school on one day and eLearning the next.



What has the District been doing to prepare for these unusual conditions for the start of school?

As you can see, the District has had to be flexible in its preparation, ensuring that we are ready to hold school as in a typical year but also taking extra measures so we can better address possible changes. Thus, we’ve secured new technology so that we can offer live lessons (and record them for student/parent review later), held summer pre-service meetings with our teachers so they can seamlessly use the new technology, and boosted the infrastructure so it can handle the new load in the event of eLearning. In truth, we’ve been working and planning for August 19 since before March 13 when physical school closures descended upon the whole state.



Will my child be required to wear a mask at school?

Yes. After a lengthy discussion over masks during task force and school board meetings, the School Board voted 5-0 to require that all persons present in school buildings wear masks to inhibit transmission of the COVID-19 virus. Parents will need to provide a mask for their child to wear. If a child forgets his/her mask, the school will provide one to them. Children will not be required to wear masks during outside recess or during meal times while food is being consumed. Nor will they be worn in certain classes in which masks would make engagement with the lesson impossible, such as welding, some music classes, and portions of auto mechanics. In classrooms with a student with a documented hearing impairment, masks that allow the speaker’s lips to be seen will be worn. Clear masks or face shields will be worn by early literacy teachers, speech therapy teachers, and others when situation so require.



What if my student goes to school but forgot his/her mask?

The school will provide one to your child. However, we do ask that you provide the mask(s) that your children wear at school on a regular basis. Before the beginning of the new school year, we plan to have a community ‘mask drive’ in which our angel volunteers—and so many people come to our aid every year we believe it will happen again this year—sew and donate masks to our schools so that every child will have access to this level of protection.



What kind of mask is allowed in school?

Pretty much any of the styles of masks you see being worn in our community will meet the needs in school. Masks should, of course, comfortably cover both the wearer’s nose and mouth. We do ask that masks comply with the school dress code and so not include words or imagery that would disrupt the educational environment, advocate for gang or illegal activity including drug or alcohol use, or be inappropriate, in general, for the school setting. Face shields are not an acceptable substitute for masks.



How can I be sure my child’s school is being regularly sanitized during this time?

Mr. John Sieverding has developed, along with our facility hygiene consulting company, Hilyard, a plan* for sanitizing and additional cleaning at this time. The plan includes:

- The use of specific cleaning solutions documented to protect against viruses.
- The installation of hand sanitizing stations throughout school buildings and, soon, in all classrooms.
- The use of more automatic cleaning equipment to allow our custodial employees to clean with greater efficiency and speed, thus allowing more repetitions throughout the school day.
- Daily work task cards, laying out for custodial employees the schedules of cleaning throughout the day.

We are also boosting our outside air intake during this time to bring more fresh air into buildings. Current ‘air exchanges’ more than meet all requirements but we will increase these, nevertheless, at this time.

*For more information regarding this plan, contact the school at 995-3010, ask for Mr. Sieverding, and he will be happy to provide additional documentation on our cleaning plan and regimen.



What actions are the schools taking to make it convenient and likely that my child will practice good sanitation at school?

- Signage will be placed around schools encouraging such.
- Spigots of water fountains for individual use will be closed off and students encouraged to fill individual, clear water bottles at filling stations in the schools.
- Hand sanitizer will be available in all classrooms, near all entrances, and throughout hallways.
- Bathroom breaks will be scheduled in such a way as to discourage a lack of social distancing and encourage frequent handwashing.



Will the school be practicing social distancing?

Yes, to the extent possible. We will be using the 6’ rule, asking people to distance themselves from others by at least that distance. We will do so through school signage, teacher instruction, and, we would ask, parental direction as well. Having said this, this level of social distancing won’t always be possible. We will be expanding the recess grounds at the elementary level to give students more space in which to play and exercise, ‘cohorting’ students during lunch and having some students eat in their current cafeteria while others dine in an alternative location, and monitoring middle school hallways to ensure students are given direction in how best to separate.



Will we be social distancing in classrooms?

Yes, to the extent possible. But maintaining a 6’ distance between students in most classrooms is simply not possible. In that case, we will focus on ‘cohorting.’



What is ‘cohorting’ and how can it be useful?

Cohorting is the practice of limiting exposure of groups of student to other groups of students, of keeping a cohort both together but also apart from other cohorts when possible. Thus, at the elementary level, especially, we will be looking at keeping a class of children in their room for as much of the day as is feasible. Thus, ‘specials’ (music and art) might be brought to the classroom. Library personnel may move book carts to classrooms for book selection. We are still working out details on this concept, recommended to us by health care professionals. Cohorting can help stop the transmission of various communicable diseases through reducing the number of people with whom students come into contact.



How will social distancing occur on school buses?

School buses pose a special challenge for social distancing. When few enough students are riding at any given time, bus drivers will direct students (not from the same household) to spread out among the available seats. But toward the end of some bus routes and certainly during ‘shuttle’ transportation of students between GBR Elementary, our exchange point, and the other four attendance centers, such distancing will likely not meet 6’ recommendations. Parents will then need to make an informed decision about their child’s use of school transportation.

Nevertheless, we will be taking the following steps to make bus transportation as safe as possible:

- Buses will be sanitized twice each day, before morning and afternoon routes.
- Additional shuttle buses will be employed to enhance social distancing on shuttles, to the extent such are available.
- Students will be encouraged to wear masks during all bus transportation.
- Students will be asked to cohort—in this case, sit with—members of their own families.



How will this affect lunch time?

At each school other than the high school, which already has sufficient dining area to allow for social distancing due to ‘open lunch’ and two cafeterias, principals and our food service director are lining up additional square footage for lunch time dining to maximize square footage. In some cases, when weather permits, students will be dining outside. Cafeteria supervisors will also be assisting students to find ways to socially distance, both during dining and in cafeteria receiving lines. Open salad bars will be eliminated for the time being, with pre-packaged salads provided instead.



Will the District be putting up signage to assist students with social distancing, hand-washing, and other hygiene practices?

Yes, such signage will be appearing in all schools close to the start of the school year.



Will there be changes to arrival times in the morning before school?

School buildings will be open at 7:30 each morning before school for the arrival of students. This will not be changed. In the past, however, students tended to gather in single areas as they awaited the inception of the school day. This year, we will institute two changes. First, additional gathering areas will be created in each school building in order to allow greater social distancing. Second, in some buildings, students will be asked to ‘cohort’ with their classmates as they wait in order to reduce contact with students they would otherwise not normally come into contact with during the school day. Additionally, parents who can do so can assist the school in this by delaying student arrival until around 8 a.m.



What about open houses?

Open houses are an important part of any new school year, an occasion during which students and parents can visit and experience their new classroom along with many of their classmates. During COVID19, however, bringing all the students and their parents/family members together will be difficult if we hope to maintain social distancing. Therefore, while each elementary school and the middle school will handle these on a building by building basis, open houses may be scheduled per student or small groups of students this year.

Thus, we would provide students with an appointed time when they should come for open house, to meet their teacher, take a peek at their desk, and stow their school supplies.



Will I still be able to visit my child's school?

Yes, of course. However, we are working hard to restrict access to persons other than school employees and students in order to limit outside exposure. Thus, we would ask that you limit your visits, remain outside during clement weather when picking up children during the school day, and make an appointment when you would like to visit. The Mitchell School District recognizes that parents are incredibly important partners in the educational process and we will lift these expectations as soon as is feasible. During this same time, vendors, outside speakers, and delivery persons will not be allowed in school buildings during the school day.



Even the first day of Kindergarten?

The first day of Kindergarten—and to a lesser but still important extent—the first of school at any grade level, is an incredibly important day in the life of a child and parent. It is a time of hugs and pictures and exchanges of very special words and signs of affection. No one wants to change that. What we are asking is that you do as much of that as possible at home before you and your child come to school and enjoy the rest of it outside the school building, to the extent possible.



What about having lunch with my child at school?

Under normal circumstances, we always welcome parents to come to school to have lunch with their children in the school cafeteria. At this time, however, we are working hard to limit the number and frequency of visitors to school. Thus, during the current outbreak, if you would like to have lunch with your child, we would ask that you take your child off school grounds for lunch. To do so, please advise the office of your request in advance then contact the office again when you would like to pick your child up and we will have them meet you at the exterior of the building front entrance. We do ask that you return your child in time for afternoon classes.



What is meant by screening procedures and how will Mitchell be implementing them?

Screening refers to procedures by which students and employees are checked on at least a daily basis for symptoms of COVID-19 infections. Screening (or gating as some call it), for example, may include such practices as questions about how individuals are feeling today—cough, sore throat, etc.—temperature checks, or even oxygen levels in the blood. We will be asking that all students and employees undergo screening procedures on a daily basis. This can be difficult to do at school, however. Due to flexible scheduling at the high school, for example, it would be complicated to ensure that all students engaged in the process at school each day. At elementary schools and middle school, screening would have the unavoidable consequence of holding students in doorways or outside and thus causing otherwise avoidable occasions of possible

transmission of the virus due to a lack of social distancing. Therefore, we will be asking that parents, before school each day, gate their children and a chart on how to conduct such will be provided to all parents. Students deemed by their parents to have symptoms consistent with COVID-19 will be excluded from being present at school until such symptoms desist. Students confirmed to have COVID-19 will likely be quarantined from being physically present at school for 10 days, as per DOH guidelines. All such students will then attend the enhanced eLearning instruction through live SWIVL broadcasts. Employees will also be required to gate at home before their workday.



Will there be sports and activities in the fall?

Frankly, we don't know yet. A number of different associations are still working on this and it is complicated by the fact that we have to pay attention to not just our school but also other participating schools. While our students are currently engaging in summer training activities, the question of extracurricular competitions and performances is still an open one.



If we do have games, will fans be allowed?

This is another one of those areas still under discussion. The Kernels will always have fans of course but whether they can be physically present at upcoming contests is still unknown.



Will students still be dressing for physical education/physical health & wellness classes?

No, or on a limited basis. Elementary students, of course, don't 'dress' for PE now but middle school and high school students do. In order to minimize use of locker rooms for these classes, we will be eliminating or minimizing dressing in PE uniforms and the use of locker rooms for the time being.



How can I be sure that my child's school is implementing the best, scientifically-based procedures?

The Mitchell School District has sought out recommendations from various expertise-based consulting bodies including the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the American Academy of Pediatrics, the South Dakota Department of Education, the South Dakota Department of Health, the Associated School Boards of South Dakota, and others. We have worked with Dr. Hilary Rockwell, the Chief Medical Officer at our local Avera/Queen of Peace Hospital, and the person leading A/QofP's COVI-19 response efforts. Dr. Rockwell is also working with Dakota Wesleyan University and Mitchell Technical College on their re-opening efforts. As a result, we are bringing the best information forward to help us open school as safely as possible.