



Reopening of Montana's Public Schools

September 4, 2020

The Office of Public Instruction (OPI) and schools across Montana have been planning their fall reopening for months. During the summer OPI has been working with our education partners to facilitate as smooth and safe a transition as possible.

As all educational groups have experienced, OPI found the summer months extraordinary challenging in addressing the unique challenges presented by a variety of changes. OPI is committed to serving our students and schools with increased resources, collaboration, flexibility, and clarity. Internally, OPI responded to the closure by equipping our staff with the necessary tools to work remotely. Today, 90% of our staff can and continue to work remotely. As an agency, we are seeing possibilities for our future changing what we are doing today.

From May through September, OPI has focused on sorting issues as they arise related to schools reopening in September of 2020. To that end, we've bolstered our communication and information gathering coming into and leaving OPI. We've sought waivers and extensions to improve flexibility for our educators and ultimately our students. Listed below are the highlights of our efforts to improve school reopening transitions, stability, and effectiveness.

Communication:

- Task Force (2): Learn and Flex helped develop a [Reopening Guidance](#) for this fall; (June)
- [OPI Survey of Montana teachers and parents](#) with a panel discussion of survey participants; (August 19th)
- FAQ document created to help the public and districts navigate through the beginning of school.
- Guest presenters at OPI/Superintendent meetings included: Montana High-School Sports Association, American Academy of Pediatrics (Montana Chapter), and Dr. Patrick Barkey (U of M Bureau of Business and Economics Research).

Guidance communication related to the changes posed by Covid-19:

- OPI Fall Reopening Guidance Document (July 2nd)
- Accreditation: Aggregate hour options
- Off-site instruction
- Attendance
- Governor's funding for transportation (webinar)
- [Governor Directives](#)
- [OPI requests to Governor](#)

School finance:

- OPI opened MAEFAIRS two weeks early (July 17) allowing districts more time to establish 2020/21 budgets as they blended in new, one-time funding from the federal and state.
- OPI provided crucial support to districts expending CARES funds (Federal Funds through OPI) and CRF funds (Federal Funds through the Governor's Office) funds with guidance documents and webinar sessions for educational leaders and advocates.

Teacher Professional Development:

- Online Teacher Learning Hub updated with increased professional development opportunities for remote learning.

Flexibility waivers initiated by OPI:

- OPI requested the Governor's Office assistance in holding taxpayers harmless through the use of the Governor's Coronavirus Relief Fund in addressing transportation funding increases (July 15th).
- OPI requested a Governor's waiver of statutes restricting ANB funding for discretionary student attendance agreement combined with off-site (remote) learning. (July 23rd)
- School nutrition waivers still in effect are:
 - Non-congregate Feeding in the Child Nutrition Programs - EXTENSION #2
 - Meal Service Time Flexibility in the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and Child and Adult Care Food Program - EXTENSION #2
 - Parents and Guardians to Pick Up Meals for Children - EXTENSION #2
 - Meal Pattern Flexibility in the Child Nutrition Programs - EXTENSION #4
 - Offer versus Serve Flexibility for Senior High Schools in the National School Lunch Program for School Year 2020-2021.
- Educator License renewal extension through September 30th (Board of Public Education, August 12).

At the OPI, we continue to include various educational stakeholders in our planning and decision making to meet the challenges we face for this school year. We are committed to providing our students, and district a steady hand at the wheel with more flexibility and resources maintaining the momentum we have created through the summer months.