



DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

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JON J. P. FERNANDEZ
Superintendent of Education

October 16, 2020

MEMORANDUM

To: Members, Guam Education Board

From: Superintendent

Re: Continuation of Distance Learning through Second Quarter // No Face-to-Face Instruction

Hafa Adai, Guam Education Board Members:

I write to inform you that, based on the authority provided to me by the Guam Education Board, I am directing that Guam Department of Education schools continue to support online and hard copy distance learning for students during the second quarter of School Year 2020-2021. Face-to-face classroom instruction will not be offered during second quarter based on the current public health emergency and our assessment of the risks associated with students returning to school facilities in the near future. While it is our shared goal for students to eventually return to school for face-to-face classroom instruction, the public health environment is unlikely to be conducive for a return to our classrooms before the end of December 2020.

Current Data Shows Guam in Highest Risk Category for Transmission of COVID-19 in Schools

Based on the framework that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has provided for assessing the risk of introduction and transmission of the COVID-19 virus in schools¹, we are in the highest risk category based on new cases and positivity rates. For this reason, it is my assessment that any decision to reopen schools in the near future is premature, and even if authorized by the Governor, it is my judgment that reopening GDOE schools during second quarter will pose untenable risks to our employees and students. It is important that our stakeholders understand that we will be working to offer and strengthen distance learning options for the second quarter and that they do not need to worry about a sudden, ill-planned return to school in the middle of the quarter and in the midst of our continued public health emergency.

A few key observations can be offered to support our current assessment:

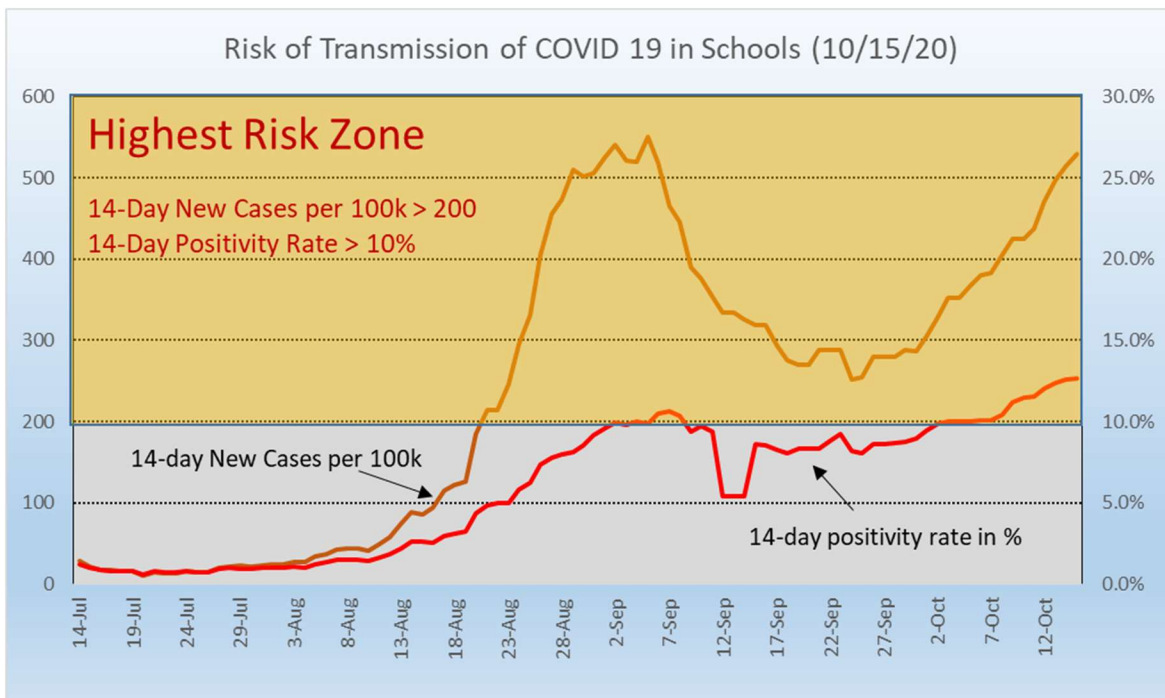
- We are currently reporting a 14-day 12.6% test positivity rate, which is **over four times** the level needed to be in the lowest risk category, set by the CDC at less than 3%.

¹ (See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/indicators.html>)

- We are currently reporting 514.6 new cases per 100,000 people over the a 14-day period, **more than 100 times** the level needed to be in the lowest risk category, set by the CDC a less than 5 new cases per 100,000 people.
- Young people aged zero to 19 years of age have **more than doubled their share** of Guam’s total number of positive cases, accounting for 7.2% of total cases back on July 1, compared to 16% of total cases on October 15. There are now 547 positive cases among this age group.
- Young people aged zero to 19 years of age make up an **increasing percentage of new cases** over a rolling 7-day window, averaging 12.5% of new cases in August, 15% of new cases in September, and 19.1% of new cases in October to date, reflecting the community spread of COVID-19 at the household level, despite PCOR1 restrictions in place and despite the prohibition on face-to-face classroom instruction since August 17.
- While we were in a low risk zone for much of July, the data shows that **we have clearly exceeded the highest risk threshold as set by CDC**, underscoring the need to address the increasing spread of COVID-19 before we can get to a scenario where we can allow students to return to our school facilities.

Chart 1. Risk of Transmission of COVID-19 in Schools as of October 15, 2020

Highest risk threshold based on CDC framework; case data from Joint Information Center reports



Based on the reasons set forth above, I am directing that GDOE schools continue to offer online and hard copy distance learning options to our students and that face-to-face classroom instruction will not be offered in the second quarter of School Year 2020-2021. I seek the GEB’s concurrence in this matter as we prioritize the safety of our employees and students.

Reactivation of District School Readiness Task Force to Prepare for Eventual Reopening

No one appreciates the fact that our schools provide important supports and services to students and families which merits our best efforts to reopen safely at some future point in time. It is this spirit of community support that has led us since March 2020 to be proactive in finding ways to continue to serve meals to our students and to distribute food commodities weekly to residents with the assistance of our mayors, nonprofit organizations, and government partners. Our school nurses, social workers, and school resource and attendance officers have been on the front lines along with our other public health responders to address the spread of COVID-19 in our community, and most of them are still assigned to the front lines during this second surge of the pandemic. Our administrators, teachers, and staff have worked hard to give parents and students options for learning, including hard copy and online distance learning options. From now until the end of the year, we will be expanding our online platform with the distribution of additional laptops as well as with solutions to assist families gain Internet access; we will work to shore up the hard copy option and to help move students to our online platform if possible.

Reopening of school facilities for face-to-face classroom instruction will likely not take place until January 2021 ***at the earliest***, assuming that the public health environment improves. As part of our preparation for this possibility, I have reactivated the District School Readiness Task Force (Task Force) to update the reopening plan that was developed and presented to the community over the summer. The Task Force is charged with reviewing and refining the plan in light of our experience over the past few months and the experiences of other school districts that have worked to reopen over the past several months. As part of this effort, we will be focused on ensuring that schools have the necessary protective supplies, equipment and training to safely welcome students back to our schools. These supplies and equipment continue to be purchased, delivered, and distributed to schools, and we will work to ensure that any outstanding items are addressed before the end of December. In addition, we believe that a robust training plan is needed to refresh and reinforce the proper use of safety supplies and equipment, cleaning and disinfection protocols, handwashing, response procedures, and other important safety matters. Further training and support for the socioemotional wellbeing of students and employees will also be emphasized.

We believe that the input of stakeholders is also crucial to the plans and decisions related to reopening our schools. We will be conducting rapid response surveys and numerous sessions to gather the input and concerns of administrators, teachers, staff, parents and students as we work through the planning process over the coming weeks. The input that we receive will help us to plan, to identify the priorities and concerns of our stakeholders, and to address these concerns straight on with information, explanation, and data.

Additionally, I have asked the Task Force to look at our options for phasing in students back to our facilities. Our original plan aimed to return students at all levels back to face-to-face classroom instruction on alternating schedules that would allow us to maintain social distancing and other safety measures within our school buildings. However, we will be reviewing other options for reopening classrooms, including phasing in different grade levels, school levels or groups of students who would benefit most from returning to school. In other districts, we have seen schools reopen to elementary students only, specific grade levels, English language learners, students with disabilities, and other priority groups, for example. We will review the options and scenarios that would make sense for our students and our community.

To keep the GEB informed of our discussions and of any actions that the GEB may be required to take, we will be scheduling regular updates each Friday at 11:00 a.m. for the Safe and Healthy Schools Committee, during which we will be able to share our discussion and proposals. These meetings will commence on Friday, October 23, 2020. We will also provide regular briefings for members of the media and for our GDOE community throughout the planning period.

I thank you for your attention to this matter and for your commitment to collaborate with the management team, the Task Force, the Guam Federation of Teachers and all other stakeholders to ensure that any reopening plan for GDOE places the safety of our employees and students first. We look forward to a time when we can come back to our school campuses to see students, teachers, and staff reconnecting and returning to more normal routines and familiar practices. Until then, we thank you for supporting us through the pandemic and for providing leadership and support in making decisions in the best interests of our students, employees, and families.

Senseramente,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jon J.P. Fernandez". The signature is stylized and cursive, with the first name "Jon" being particularly prominent.

JON J.P. FERNANDEZ