

Education Leaders Work to Ensure Schools Are Safe for Students, Staff

These are extraordinary times. I never thought as County Superintendent I would work with our school district superintendents on plans to close schools and create distance learning plans across the county. I want to thank the families, students and staff for their cooperative spirit and flexibility to overcome this pandemic and continue education for our students. As in every situation, the health and well-being of our students, families and school communities is our top priority.

This entire experience is painful and isolating and we know that some of our students are experiencing both physical and emotional challenges. While all school districts in Merced County have continued the school breakfast and lunch program, for some families, the food costs are mounting up.

In other homes, the isolation is beginning to create anxiety and even depression. We know that schools provide much more than access to knowledge and we ache as educators to reopen our schools.

As you have likely heard, Merced County has been approved to move into Stage 2.5, which allows for offices, malls, dine-in restaurants, child care facilities and schools to reopen. While this is good news for our community and local economy, we are cautiously optimistic and spending countless hours planning for next school year and some of the challenges we face.

Merced County's Variance Attestation Form, which was approved by the state of California late Tuesday, is a 19-page document that outlines the readiness to open businesses and includes safety plans, timelines and much more.

Though schools are part of Stage 2.5, in the Variance Attestation Form it states that schools will remain closed for the remainder of this school year and that a reopening task force is working to identify new procedures and protocols under which schools will operate to keep our students and staff safe.

The reality is schools will look different this fall.

To maintain social distance in our schools, we will have to be flexible in our thinking and offer options to parents and students. Some students will attend school, some will continue with distance learning and some might work in a blended model of attending on specific days.

Some children need the support of a daily school experience. Some children can thrive at home while they learn at their own rate, but need content direction from education professionals. We are working to identify ways all students can succeed while keeping everyone on our campuses safe.

There have been questions about graduations in June and schools are identifying unique ways to honor graduating classes without the traditional commencement.

We have worked closely with our partners at the Merced County Department of Public Health to review different graduation scenarios and we know that the gathering of large crowds still endangers our children.

Simply put: In the current situation we cannot hold mass gatherings.

There will be time again in the future to celebrate the accomplishments of our children without putting them and their families at risk of infection and causing a spike in the virus that would cause us to delay the reopening of our public schools.

As an educator of nearly 40 years, I understand how difficult this is for our students and families and we hope that we can celebrate our graduates in a more traditional way.

Steve M. Tietjen, Ed.D.

Merced County Superintendent of Schools