



Remarks to the Guilford County Board of Education

Sharon L. Contreras, PhD

Superintendent of Schools

August 11, 2020

Good afternoon.

GCS is one of four North Carolina districts that last week was awarded an N.C. Department of Public Instruction Compensation Models and Advanced Teaching Roles pilot grant. The district will receive \$417,443 in funding for the 2020-21 school year to support advanced teaching roles and models that link teacher performance and professional growth to salary increases for classroom teachers.

The grant will support the following district priorities:

- Incentivizing effective teachers to stay in lowest performing schools

- Building or expanding career pathways for teachers to assume classroom leadership roles
- Extending the Opportunity Culture model in K-12 schools

In addition, the state has created a permanent grant program for this important work, beginning in the 2020-21 school year. GCS will be eligible to apply for this program in the fall, which could extend the impact of this project by three more years, if awarded.

Please join me in congratulating our eight semi-finalists for Principal of the Year. They are:

- Shannon Peeples, Cone Elementary
- Carla Flores-Ballesteros, Allen Jay Elementary
- Stephanie Rakes, Vandalia Elementary
- Kimberly Jones-Goods, Sumner Elementary
- Erik Naglee, Page High
- Janiese Mckenzie, Northern Guilford High
- Johnita Readus, Bluford Elementary
- And Jamisa Williams, the STEM Early College at North Carolina A&T

We will announce the winner later this fall.

Reopening Schools

Last week school began for students at our nine early and middle colleges, and surely was a very different first day of school than in years' past. Tomorrow, teachers across the district will return to work as we prepare to start remote learning for all remaining students on Monday, August 17.

Health and Safety Protocols

To promote the health and safety of all staff and minimize exposure to COVID-19 to the greatest extent possible, we have developed several health protocols – working in concert with the Guilford County Department of Public Health and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services -- which principals and supervisors will share with employees this week. These protocols are also posted on the district's website.

These include staggering work and student schedules to eliminate congestion at entry points and reduce individual classroom and overall building occupancy, limiting in-person meetings, conducting symptom screening and temperature checks for students, staff and visitors prior to or immediately upon building entry, using CDC and EPA-aligned cleaning protocols, and following standard operating procedures when an employee tests positive, shows symptoms of COVID-19 and/or has been exposed to someone with a positive case of COVID-19.

To assist principals and supervisors in conveying this information to all employees, we have developed two presentations, "What to Know about

COVID-19” and “Preparations, Procedures, and Protocols” as well as the accompanying handouts.

These items were shared with principals this weekend, and are also posted on the district’s Reconnect, Reopen and Stay Safe web section, which can be found at www.gcsnc.com/reopening.

The following documents were also shared and posted on our website:

- Required Practices to Minimize COVID-19 Exposure
- Student Symptom Screening Checklist – Handout
- Employee Symptom Screening Checklist – Handout
- Hygiene and Cleaning Protocols

I invite employees and parents to review these documents and keep checking this website for updates as we continue to post new information regularly. I would also note that these are “living” documents.

As we continue to deal with a crisis with no end in sight and rapidly changing information and directives, changes to plans, protocols and procedures are inevitable – frustrating, but inevitable.

Our Reconnect, Reopen and Stay Safe website will serve as the hub for all district information related to reopening and will be updated frequently to make sure employees, parents/guardians and others have access to the most current information.

Central office staff, principals, custodians, maintenance workers, office support personnel and our 160-member task force have been working extremely hard on our reopening plan and to prepare for the remote learning that will take place for at least the first nine weeks of the year.

While teachers are not paid to work during the summer, more than 7,000 participated in more than 200 professional learning sessions since schools closed in June.

Professional learning schedules have been posted since March on Canvas and have been shared with principals and others through the district's e-newsletters for principals and staff.

Please note that live instruction online for most schools and subjects will not take place until after Labor Day. Teachers and counselors will assess and meet with students, conduct student orientation sessions and touch base individually.

In addition, the Academic Services team has produced high-quality remote learning lessons for students at all grade levels and has purchased additional digital content to engage students while teachers prepare for the shift to live, online instruction.

Website Updates

We have added more information to the “Reconnect, Reopen and Stay Safe” section of our website.

Parents and students can now watch videos that will help them with remote learning, including videos about Canvas, Google Apps for Education and Microsoft Teams. Sample schedules for each grade level have also been posted.

We have also added several instructional guidance documents outlining what parents need to know for each grade span, as well as other preparations for the start of the school year. These can be found at www.gcsnc.com/reopening.

I invite parents to review these documents and keep checking this website and their school websites for more information about what the school year will look like.

Academic Instruction

Given the significant research emerging on learning loss, our students must experience a different kind of remote learning this fall. It's time for real school and authentic learning. The school closures last spring constituted an emergency, and teachers had less than two weeks to make the massive shift from in-person, in-classroom instruction to remote learning. Day cares were closed, and everyone was quarantined at home.

This year, while we are improving GCS virtual learning with weekly check-ins by teachers with students starting immediately and live, online instruction starting for all students after Labor Day. Teachers can work from their classrooms and now have dozens of hours of experience and training – training that continues all month and throughout the school year.

We have purchased more digital resources and materials from some of the nation’s top providers and have videotaped some of our district’s most highly effective teachers in key subject areas so all students can benefit from their expertise until live, online instruction begins.

Virtual Schools

More than 7,300 students have registered to become students at the virtual schools, including 2,017 at the high school level, 1,948 at the middle school level and 3,378 at the elementary level.

We have received several questions about the difference between remote learning and the virtual schools. It’s important to note that the virtual schools are separate, full-time schools with their own principals and staff.

Students who wish to stay enrolled at their current schools will begin the year with remote learning, but that may change after Oct. 20, depending on current health trends and the action of the board. Once schools reopen, instruction at all but our virtual schools will shift from remote to in-person, in-classroom learning.

In both situations, students will remain at home and will learn primarily using the Canvas learning platform, which has been updated to make it easier for parents to track their child's progress.

Students will be able to transfer from the virtual school to their assigned or home school at the semester break or the end of the school year.

Parents may register until Sept. 15. Transfers will only be considered at the end of the semester or at the end of the year.

Career and College Promise

Nearly 1,000 eleventh and twelfth graders will participate in the Career and College Promise (CCP) dual-enrollment program. This program will allow our high school students to take college courses while still enrolled in high school. As a reminder, students do not have to pay for the college courses while enrolled in CCP. This will benefit all students but will do much to eliminate the vast disparities in college attendance by race and socioeconomic status. It will also dramatically reduce parent/student loan debt.

For the Fall 2020 semester, students do not need to pay for any other fees such as labs; however, they will still need to pay for books. GTCC will be using Government CARES Act funds to pay fees for CCP students, and we

thank them for their support. Free transportation is available through the Greensboro and High Point Transit Authorities, which have routes to all three GTCC campuses.

Bridging the Digital Divide

One of the biggest challenges we face in expanding remote learning has been the lack of devices for all students. I'm pleased to announce that we have purchased more than 79,000 devices, nearly enough for every student, teacher and instructional support staff member. These items will arrive later this fall and will put teaching and learning on a level playing field for all students. We appreciate the Board of County Commissioners for allocating some \$10 million in CARES act funding for this purpose late last week.

We will also be deploying 125 smart buses in the community to improve access to the internet in areas that are lacking. These buses will serve high-needs communities to help bridge the digital divide.

Expanding Internet Access

While we continue to be creative in our strategies and partnerships to ensure a successful year, we also must continue to urge our elected

officials at the local, state and federal to expand internet access in all communities, particularly in our lower income and rural areas.

I believe internet access should be treated as another public utility and that the FCC should utilize its billions of dollars to mandate expansion into all areas and not just those deemed the most profitable.

I thank the Board and its Legislative Committee for taking the lead on this important issue, and encourage all board members, employees, parents, families and members of the public to contact their elected officials in support of this issue.

While we are doing our part – and most would say more than our fair share as we expand hotspots to 3,500 and send smart buses into our communities – we cannot do this on our own.

Others must step up as well, which is why I'm pleased to let you know that the High Point Schools Partnership, Business High Point and the City of High Point worked together to identify more locations with city-owned and managed Wi-Fi, including recreation centers and other buildings with public-facing internet access. Having this expanded map will help us deploy our "smart" buses more strategically.

The City of High Point also has agreed to add bus routes to GTCC as does the City of Greensboro, removing yet another potential access barrier for many GCS students who want to take advantage of the Career and College

Promise program. We are deeply appreciative of these efforts, and we need more partners to help address the needs of our students.

Learning Centers

To further assist students and families in neighborhoods and communities with poor internet connectivity, GCS will offer learning centers in targeted areas of the county. Starting August 31, students may participate in remote learning at 13 school sites. Students will have the opportunity to use school internet and technology to complete their assignments.

The learning centers will be housed in a wing or area of the school that is separate from where teachers and most staff are working. While we do not have the funding to transport students to these sites, we are strategically locating them at schools in or near communities where Census Bureau data indicates more than two-thirds of households are without broadband connectivity.

In fact, according to the American Community Survey 2018 five-year estimate, less than 62.35% households have any type of broadband access in these school communities.

Having learning centers in these areas will make it easier for students to walk or ride their bicycles to the schools, or for their families to transport them or make carpool arrangements.

The learning centers will operate from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Monday through Friday. This is not a replica of normal schooling. One teacher or supervisor cannot possibly teach all grade levels and subjects. This is about providing internet access in a safe and secure environment to help bridge the technology gap in our communities while maintain all health/safety protocols. There is no fee for this service.

We will share more details regarding the student registration process for this program next week. The schools that will house learning centers include:

- Cone Elementary
- McLeansville Elementary
- Reedy Fork Elementary
- Parkview Elementary
- Sedalia Elementary
- Washington Elementary
- Wiley Elementary
- Eastern Middle
- Jackson Middle
- Southeast Middle
- Andrews High
- Northeast Guilford High and,
- Southwest Guilford High

ACES staff

The Human Resources department has been working to find new roles for the ACES employees impacted by remote learning this fall.

An email was sent to all ACES employees on July 28, 2020 following the school board's decision to re-open with remote learning for the first 9 weeks or more. ACES employees were informed that Human Resources Office would be reaching out to them to discuss their employment options.

To date, we placed all 51 of the fulltime ACES Coordinators who desired assignments with the school district. These include:

- 32 employees who took Teacher Assistant positions
- 14 employees who took EC Teacher Assistant positions
- 3 employees who took Classroom Teacher positions at Brightwood Elementary, McLeansville Elementary and Southern High
- 1 employee who took an Office Support-Treasurer position
- And 1 employee who resigned

Human Resources continues to follow up with the 187 ACES Group Leaders and 8 Clerks who are part-time employees to assist them with finding opportunities for which they qualify.

Teacher Survey

Recently we surveyed teachers to understand if they had a medical need to teach remotely or if they had a preference to teach at the virtual schools but not a medical need. 3,941 certified personnel responded to this survey.

Through this survey we learned that 395 teachers, or just over 10% of our teachers, have a medical need to teach remotely. Also, 468 teachers, or just over 12%, have a preference to teach at the virtual schools.

In total, 863 teachers indicated a need or desire to stay out of the classroom. This leaves about 77% of our teaching staff who did not indicate that they needed or desired to teach remotely.

Childcare Options

As of the beginning of August, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services has identified about 30,000 open slots available for school-aged children in licensed child care facilities.

Since options vary county by county, we are investigating whether community-based organizations, such as our local YMCAs, YWCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs and Communities in Schools can provide childcare for school-aged children in a limited number of GCS schools. We have already

met twice (virtually) with representatives of these organizations, all of which have experience in working with school-aged children and providing full-day programs.

Last week we administered a survey assessing the childcare needs of our staff who have children between the ages of 5 and 12. Of the 4,504 teachers, bus drivers and school nutrition staff who responded, 1,494 (33%) said they have school age children. The majority (59%) said they need childcare, and 61% said they would bring their child to campus during the remote learning period if allowable. Less than half (47%) stated that they would pay for affordable childcare if the service were available.

Per emergency rules adopted recently by the state's Childcare Commission, public schools also have the option of contracting with community-based organizations to provide remote learning options for school-aged children. The Commission anticipates the rule change will become effective August 17.

In the meantime, GCS employees and families seeking daily support for their children aged 12 or below can also call the Department of Health and Human Services' child-care hotline at 1-888-600-1685.

School Nutrition

Our summer meal distribution program runs through August 31. Meals are available at 41 schools and 65 neighborhood locations for children under the age of 18. Meals will be available from 11 a.m. to Noon Monday

through Thursday. You can view the full schedule on our website at www.gcsnc.com under Quick Links.

After August 31, unless additional action is taken by Congress, we will not be able to serve as many students at as many sites as we did during school closures last spring as the US Department of Agriculture has approved some, but not all of the state's requests for waivers regarding existing regulations associated with the National School Lunch program.

The state has received waivers for non-congregant distribution (which means we can distribute meals for students when they are not eating in the classroom, school cafeteria or at picnic tables on school grounds), parent pick-up (grab and go) and meal flexibility that allows us to give parents two meals (today's lunch and tomorrow's breakfast) at one time for each child so they don't have to come back two times daily.

However, the state – and by extension GCS – did not receive a waiver to distribute meals to students without verifying that each child qualifies for the free- or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch program and then charging and collecting money from those who don't qualify for the cost of the meals.

While these rules usually are handled quickly and discreetly when students are eating in a classroom or school cafeteria, it will be more difficult to do so curbside and may serve as a barrier to participation in the program.

Without a waiver, we will no longer be able to use school buses and transportation workers to distribute meals to our most impoverished neighborhoods.

The simpler meals require less preparation and fewer staff for distribution, which potentially impacts a significant number of school nutrition workers – at least temporarily, while our students are learning remotely. Student participation in the “grab and go” meals will determine the number of employees who may need to find other employment, at least temporarily. While we will try to place them in other positions in GCS for which they qualify, this issue potentially places more families at risk for hunger due to temporary job loss. As a reminder, school nutrition is an enterprise fund – it is funded completely by the income it generates.

The number of children served daily helps illustrate the impact this situation could have in our community:

- Last summer, we served about 6,500 meals per day (breakfast and lunch).
- This summer, we are serving about 19,000 to 20,000 meals per day (breakfast and lunch).
- Last spring, with the waivers in place, we served between 33,000 and 34,000 meals daily.

Once again, I urge the school board and members of the public to contact their Congressional representatives about this important issue and urge

Congressional action to remove barriers to participation in meal distributions for hungry children during remote learning.

Summation

We cannot underestimate the impact of the decisions we make, or the complexity involved in planning to reopen schools during a pandemic that has spiraled out of control in a sea of misinformation.

We are the size of a city with 10,000 employees, 73,000 students and their families and my own beloved child. Our GCS family faces untold stress and trauma.

However, we will get through this. We are Guilford County. But amidst this national trauma, with no clear end in sight, we need your help.

We must work together to support our students and educators during this challenging time caused by COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus.

We need to extend each other more grace and more mercy. We need to recognize that once again, public schools have been left to address nearly every issue in society: food insecurity, lack of internet access, lack of affordable childcare, transportation...the list goes on and on.

Over the past four months, as our state and national direction has been in constant flux, our staff has looked for solutions. They have spent countless

hours, 7 days a week, planning for all possibilities to return to school on August 17 – a date that none of us would have chosen, but was mandated by the state legislature nonetheless.

Like school systems nationwide, we are facing the reality that there are no simple solutions, and that each decision impacts another, and another, and another.

We all know the logistical challenges are many. But it all boils down to one question: How do you keep students learning and safeguard their health, and the health of our staff?

We plan to strictly adhere to the requirements and best practices provided to us by public health experts at the local, state and federal levels.

Thus far, the \$20 million GCS received in federal stimulus funding hasn't been enough to help us fully manage this global medical crisis. Costs are increasing.

Our normal budgets do not include funding for personal protective equipment, disinfectant sprayers, plexiglass shields, extensive signage, or digital thermometers that scan screen hundreds of students and staff quickly and efficiently. Yet we've purchased all of these items.

Without greater funding and support from Congress, this medical crisis is quickly turning into an educational one. We face the prospect of losing an entire generation of children.

We have a long history in the nation of asking public schools to do the impossible on shoe-string budgets. And, despite these challenges, we deliver, year after year. This year, the shoe string is finally breaking. We need more help to pay the rising costs caused by this crippling pandemic.

If we do not receive adequate federal support, we must depend on us, our beloved community. Our children are too important, our teachers and staff are too vital.

We are North Carolina's third largest school system and one of Guilford County's largest employers. We are one of the largest 50 school districts out of more than 14,000 nationally. What's at stake is what you see around us. There is no economy without a well-educated workforce.

Private donations and volunteer muscle do help. Thank you. We are so grateful. Yet it's an inadequate response to sustainable, equitable public-school funding. That is what we need, and that is why we must collectively advocate.

So, we look to you.

Thank you for your continued support and collaboration to keep us safe, to keep us whole. No, it won't be easy. Everyone is stressed, angry, frustrated and scared. Many are grieving. It's only natural to feel this way.

But we must remember what never changes, from generation to generation. Educators, with the help of parents and the community, can transform lives.

That one idea makes what we do worth it – and we can work together to make that happen. Simply look into the face of any child in Guilford County to understand why.

Thank you. This concludes my remarks and I'd be happy to entertain any questions from school board members.