



Support Services Department

Return to School Plan

Overview

The Support Services Department houses several distinct, but often overlapping, areas that include the following: Special Education & Related Services; Alternative Programs, such as Ready for Success (RFS) and the S.T.A.R. program (for students with Autism); Health Services; Homebound, HomeSchool, and Virtual Programming; Preschool EXCEL Programming and Early Childhood Evaluation; Home & School Coordination; Truancy Intervention; Family Planning & Assessment Team; VTSS/PBIS Coordination, and Medicaid Recovery. These areas are integral to the overall operations of the division and ensure that the needs of our families are addressed with both compassion and integrity. As PCS begins to plan for reopening of schools, the Support Services Department is proactively identifying and prioritizing the learning of our most vulnerable students, some of which include students with disabilities and students experiencing significant social and emotional needs.

Special Education & Related Services

When students with disabilities return to school after an extended closure, their needs may be very different. To facilitate a successful school opening, PCS has created guidance in order to be proactive when considering, planning, and implementing both *procedural and substantive aspects* of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities. PCS' Special Education Department is dedicated to the meeting the following: 1) safety, health, and welfare of all students; 2) provision of free appropriate public education (FAPE); 3) ongoing evaluation for special education and/or related services and 4) consistent communication with families regarding the special education process.

1) General Health and Safety Precautions

In response to the increased health and safety concerns related to the COVID-19 outbreak, the following strategies outlined in the division's COVID-19 Health Plan will be implemented to protect students returning to the school building.

- Routine Cleaning and Disinfection
 - Frequently touched surfaces (e.g., playground equipment, door handles, sink handles, drinking fountains) within the classroom will be cleaned and disinfected between use as much as possible.
 - Scheduled routine cleaning and disinfection of commonly shared areas (e.g., hallway, cafeteria, gymnasium), classroom surfaces and furniture, and restrooms.
- Minimize Use of Shared Objects & Supplies
 - Ensure adequate supplies to minimize sharing of high touch materials to the extent possible (e.g., assigning each student their own art supplies, equipment) or limit use of supplies and equipment by one group of children at a time and clean and disinfect between use.
 - Keep each child's belongings separated from others' and in individually labeled containers, cubbies, or areas.
- Promote Physical Distancing
 - Space seating/desks at least 6 feet apart.
 - Turn desks to face in the same direction (rather than facing each other), or have students sit on only one side of tables, spaced apart.
 - Provide physical guides, such as tape on floors or sidewalks and signs on walls, to ensure that staff and children remain at least 6 feet apart in lines and at other times (e.g. guides for creating "one way routes" in hallways).
 - Stagger use of shared spaces when physical distancing of at least 6 feet can be maintained. Clean and disinfect between uses.

2) Provision of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Students receiving Special Education and/or Related Services will be educated in their Least Restrictive Environment to the fullest extent possible, as determined by the IEP team. Individualized Educational Plans (IEP) may require revisions to adjust learning goals and/or address the potential need for continued distance learning. A continuum of instructional options - from in-person to virtual instruction - will be available for IEP team consideration to meet the unique needs of each student. According to a Fact Sheet entitled "Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Schools While Protecting the Civil Rights of Students" published by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, *"Accessible technology may afford students, including students with disabilities, an opportunity to have access to high-quality educational instruction during an extended school closure, especially when continuing education must be provided through distance learning."* To help identify the need and scope of virtual supports for students with disabilities who may choose that option, PCS continues to explore and refine the answers to the following questions:

- Are students with disabilities able to acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services in an equally effective integrated manner and with substantially equivalent ease of use as a learner without a disability?

- Are the curriculum and instruction programs available to every learner, including specially-designed instruction materials?
- Are the curriculum and instruction programs accessible to every student?
- Can every student use the curriculum and instruction programs?

School leadership recovery teams should also consider the impact of this work on their faculty and staff and the support needed to ensure effectiveness and efficiency. Specific concerns include:

- how to train teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers in creating and obtaining accessible materials;
- needed technological resources for educators/staff and students/families;
- division contact information;
- which additional areas teachers will need to address (social/emotional, academic);
- which staff have/do not have access to WiFi; and
- how the school division can support WiFi in certain regions/neighborhoods (i.e., buses with WiFi hotspots).

3) Evaluation

Pittsylvania County Schools remains committed to upholding Child Find responsibilities as outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S.C. § 1412 (a)(3)). While COVID-19 presents many health concerns related to in-person evaluation, a comprehensive safety plan for evaluation was developed by the Support Services Team and can be found [here](#). At this time, all evaluations requiring in-person assessment components will take place in a centralized location at the School Board Office. As reopening plans are more clearly defined, this practice will be revisited and procedures tweaked as appropriate.

4) Communication with Families

Collaboration between the school and family are of utmost importance. Case Management will continue to work closely with students and families to ensure Individualized Education Plans are designed to meet the needs of each student, recognizing many of those needs may have evolved since the closure. For those students requiring continued distance learning, weekly contact between the student, family, and case manager will also continue. School staff will utilize a variety of means to communicate with families and will continue to offer virtual and phone conferencing options for meetings.

Preschool EXCEL Programming

A separate planning committee composed of preschool administrators will develop a more robust plan that will address unique needs of the EXCEL program, including classroom set-up, curriculum, instructional delivery, and safety. It is the team's hope that all EXCEL learners will receive daily instruction from their assigned teachers in the school building with their peers. In order to meet the needs of our students and families with varying levels of comfort, distance learning options will be available.

Virtual Programming & HomeSchool

Pittsylvania County Schools offers a variety of learning options for families who prefer to home school their children, including online courses and programs, as critical for 21st century learners. Virtual learning programs offer flexibility to students while providing instruction aligned with the Standards of Learning.

1) Virtual Learning

Pittsylvania County Schools offers virtual learning for students enrolled in grades K-12. Eligibility for enrollment in the Pittsylvania County Schools Virtual Learning program is based on the following criteria:

- Students must be enrolled as a student in Pittsylvania County Schools.
- Students comply with division policies and procedures for registering/enrolling in the virtual learning program.
- Student's parents or guardians provide written permission for their children's participation in online full-time programs.
- Students achieve and maintain satisfactory grades in the online learning environment.

Currently, Pittsylvania County Schools offers the following types of online courses:

- Grade-level coursework for K-12
- Standard-level courses that meet high school graduation requirements
- Advanced Placement courses
- Career and technical courses

Students residing within the boundaries of the Pittsylvania County school division, shall not be charged tuition for enrolling in any online course or virtual program offered, pursuant to [Code of Virginia § 22.1-3](#).

2) HomeSchool

In Virginia, the compulsory attendance law permits a child subject to that law to attend a private or public school or receive an education through alternatives to school attendance outlined in state law unless the child is excused from attendance by a local school board, as stated in [§ 22.1-254 of the Code of Virginia](#).

Medical Homebound

Homebound services are available to all students who are enrolled in Pittsylvania County Schools. The program is designed to provide continuity of educational services between the classroom and home setting for students whose medical needs, either physical or psychiatric, preclude school attendance. It may also be used to supplement the classroom program for health impaired children whose conditions may interfere with consistent attendance (e.g., students receiving dialysis, chemotherapy, or radiation treatments) or for children with disabilities that prevent regular school attendance. To meet the needs of all students, Pittsylvania County Schools utilizes a mixed-delivery model for providing Homebound services including direct instructional services and online modules with consultation. While homebound instruction is helpful to students whose illnesses and special needs preclude school attendance for a period of time, it has limitations. We encourage parents to work closely with the school contact person, typically the student's Homebound Coordinator, to make program choices that will ensure the success of their children who require homebound instruction.

Truancy & Chronic Absenteeism

Monitoring and tracking attendance in an online or remote environment is more challenging than in the brick and mortar school settings since teachers and administrators are not able to gauge attendance based on a visual observation or face-to-face interaction. Compulsory attendance requirements set forth in [§22.1-254](#) of the Code of Virginia do permit participation in educational programs and courses at a site remote from the school with the permission of the school division and in conformity with applicable requirements. Thus, participation in remote and virtual learning would be permitted. A continuum of instructional delivery options is available to meet needs of individual students. Attendance requirements will ultimately be measured by student performance; however, as the division embarks upon remote learning, expectations related to attendance in virtual meetings, timeliness in completion of assignments, and/or potential face-to-face meetings may evolve.

Social & Emotional Wellness

The cumulative effects of COVID-19 have had an impact on every student, every family, and every staff member across Pittsylvania County. These universal impacts have heightened the need for learning environments that are welcoming to and supportive of all staff and students.

As we prepare for a transition back to school instruction, planning must focus on how schools can address barriers to learning and re-engage disconnected students. To address the varying levels of impact, a multi-tiered approach to mental health supports and services will be provided to ensure equitable learning opportunities for our students. Tier 1 - or universal supports and practices - are provided for all students in all classrooms. Some students, though, may require additional intervention (Tier 2) and mental health treatment (Tier 3). Those strategies are outlined fully in the division's [Social-Emotional Wellness Plan](#), and [SEL resources](#) from the VDOE. A sample of these strategies are provided below:

Staff Social-Emotional Wellness

Uncertainties around school opening, instructional unknowns, and the shift to distance learning has impacted educators' identity and role in unexpected and anxiety-provoking ways. Division and building leaders and school counselors should look for ways to support the social and emotional well-being for all staff. Examples might include:

- organizing regular check-in meetings for staff,
- giving teachers specific support and guidance in developing techniques to reduce stress and other SEL-related issues
- detect early warning signs for mental health need

Opportunities for adults to connect, heal, and cultivate their own SEL competencies and capacities can also be provided through grade level and cohort teacher meetings as well as designated opportunities for teachers to process their experiences.

Student Social-Emotional Wellness

The experience of the COVID-19 closure has added a new layer of urgency to incorporate SEL skills into the daily routine as children cannot access the academic curriculum until they have their emotional needs met first. The recommended protocol for daily monitoring of student's well-being is based on the Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) model for social emotional development. Schools are encouraged to provide daily check-ins at the beginning of class or 1st period as part of defined core instruction. This creates an opportunity for teachers to have an understanding of where students are emotionally each day. Universal check-in methods support school connectedness and check for students who need extra support. Examples of check-ins can be electronic, a chart in the classroom, a morning meeting, mood meter, or welcome inclusion activity. New opportunities for this activity may be through temperature checks and re-entry survey questions required for safety.