



# United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
Washington, D.C. 20240

AUG 06 2020

Dear Tribal Leader:

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been the Bureau of Indian Education's (BIE) goal to provide continuity of education for all BIE students who depend on us. While we will begin the 2020-2021 school year in an unprecedented way, we will continue striving for excellence in teaching and learning. As a follow-up to the BIE tribal consultations held on July 9, 10, and 14, 2020, regarding school reopening, I am pleased to share with you our plans for the reopening of BIE school sites during the COVID-19 pandemic recovery.

We have been actively preparing for the start of 2020-2021 school year for several months. As you know and have experienced, it has been challenging and complex. The Department of the Interior (Department), Indian Affairs, and the BIE are actively involved in supporting the federal response to COVID-19. We continue to collaborate with states and other federal agencies including the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Education and Agriculture, as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) school system.

The guidance in this letter specifically pertains to Bureau-operated schools. However, BIE recommends tribally-controlled schools operated pursuant to a grant under the Tribally Controlled Schools Act of 1988 (25 U.S.C. SS 2501 et seq.) or pursuant to a contract under the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act (25 U.S.C. 5301 et seq.) take the recommendations included as guidance to inform their general operations and to prepare each learning environment for the 2020-2021 school year.

## **START DATE**

**September 16, 2020.** Based on initial feedback collected through formal tribal consultation and stakeholder surveys, BIE-operated K-12 schools will use a uniform start day of September 16, 2020, for the 2020-2021 school year. This will allow schools to prepare for the safe return of students and staff while following the CDC Guidelines for opening schools. Students more effectively learn and grow while attending school during in-person academic instruction. The BIE is also better able to ensure continuity in student academic services and enrichment when students are present at school.

- To the maximum extent possible, BIE schools will operate brick and mortar schools. Schools will have a range of options for scheduling students, e.g., full-time attendance, rotational schedule with reduced class sizes and reduced number of students in the buildings. Local decisions will be made in coordination with tribes, states and local public health officials.

- BIE schools will be ready to employ a remote learning model if COVID-19 spread leads to a shutdown of schools. For anticipated closures of five days or less, there is no requirement to switch to full-time remote learning.
- Families with health vulnerabilities related to COVID-19, or who are concerned about returning to a brick and mortar school setting, will be provided a virtual platform to continue learning.
- Families without the capability to connect to a virtual learning model will be provided an alternative education program.

## REOPENING PLAN & NEXT STEPS

The BIE School Reopening Task Force (Task Force) gathered tribal consultation comments and stakeholder survey responses to inform the School Reopening Plan, Return to Learn!, referred to herein as the Plan. The Plan will provide school leaders with general guidance and protocols for educational continuity within a safe and healthy environment for BIE students.

School leaders and Education Program Administrators (EPA) will work with local tribes to implement school specific plans for the start of the school year. Each school, in coordination with their EPA and tribal leaders, will have the flexibility to implement the guidelines in a manner that best meets the health and safety needs of students and staff while minimizing the impact on teaching and learning. Where needed, schools will solicit support from the Department's leadership to overcome obstacles towards achieving their goals.

Educators will receive professional development which supports them in being effective instructional leaders in a COVID-19 environment. They will receive training and the protocols essential for establishing and maintaining safe and healthy school environments that reduce the risk of COVID-19 for students and staff. School leaders will incorporate risk mitigation measures and prepare facilities and buses based on the recommendations from BIE's Plan, each state's reopening plan, and the latest guidance from the CDC including [CDCs Preparing K-12 School Administrators for a Safe Return to School in Fall 2020](#).

## TOOLKIT

The Task Force is developing a toolkit for each BIE-operated school that will provide resources for school personnel:

- **Communications** — Key messages and talking points for tribal and school leaders to facilitate communication in a variety of forums.
- **Resources** — The Plan ("Return to Learn") and operational guidelines and protocols for a safe and healthy school environment (e.g., wearing of masks, hygiene, disinfecting spaces).
- **Checklists**
  - Social Distancing at Schools (e.g., classrooms, corridors, common areas, playgrounds).

- Mental Health and Well-Being — Resources to support the emotional well-being of students.
- Reopening Safely — CDC health and safety requirements including training on blood borne pathogens; PPE control and disinfection; social distancing in classrooms, retrofitting equipment, assessing water supplies and HVAC systems, food and security options for students; and accommodations for students with special needs.
- Students with Disabilities — Schools must provide all services pursuant to student individualized education programs through in-person or structured remote instruction, with an emphasis on providing in-person instruction to this particularly vulnerable population of students. In response to tribal consultation comments, we will give guidance to make the transition into the upcoming school year easier for students with special needs.
- **Waiver Request Template** — Application to request waivers of 25 CFR Subchapter E requirements.
- **Frequently Asked Questions**

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

We have a two-pronged approach to enhance our instructional technology platform.

**Short Term:** We will provide secure, wireless access in each school, and to the extent possible, for families (including mobile hotspots and Jetpack). We will inventory and evaluate the current information technology infrastructure, equipment and curricular requirements (e.g., recommendations for a Learning Management System) and develop a long term strategy for improvements.

**Long Term:** Our inventories and evaluations will help us understand the true connectivity challenges in the communities where BIE schools are located and develop solutions to enhance the integration of technology in our instructional practices and in our virtual learning setting. We will be reaching out to tribal leaders and technology experts to understand the local challenges faced by your community. If your tribe is interested in engaging in this discussion, please have your office contact my broadband subject matter expert, Stephanie Henning at: [Stephanie.Henning@bia.gov](mailto:Stephanie.Henning@bia.gov).

## RESIDENTIAL FACILITIES

Bureau operated residential facilities, including Off Reservation Boarding Schools (ORBS) and dormitories will only provide day-school instruction. This will avoid students traveling outside the commuting area. Students enrolled for the 2020-2021 school year will be provided distance learning opportunities to continue their BIE education. Current residential staff who would normally support 24-hour services at ORBS will continue to work within the BIE facility. Their roles and responsibilities may be modified to support day-school operations.

## **SCHOOL LUNCH**

School leaders are expected to continue coordination with their respective school boards and local tribal governments to provide school lunches. Training will be provided to food service staff to ensure proper safety and food handling protocols are consistent with the Food and Drug Administration guidelines and CDC guidance regarding COVID-19.

## **WAIVER REQUESTS**

Consistent with the BIE's June 25, 2020(), Dear School Leader Letter, school leaders may submit a waiver request of any 25 CFR Subchapter E requirements they are unable to meet because of modified school schedule and operations. Approval of any waiver application will be conditioned on assurances of the school's compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, with the submission of a distance learning plan, including assurances for students to access school lunch services. The BIE will provide a waiver request template, which school leaders may use to submit a waiver application.

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

For updated information, CDC Guidelines, communication materials, links to documents and the BIE Reopening Plan (Return to Learn!), please visit the BIE website at [www.bie.edu](http://www.bie.edu) and <https://www.bia.gov/covid-19>.

COVID-19 is an unprecedented challenge to tribal governments, BIE schools, and all our communities on a scale never before experienced. We take immense responsibility of educating and creating opportunities for every student seriously. The Department, Indian Affairs, and BIE leadership stand ready to work alongside tribes, communities and staff to meet the daily needs of our students and families. I am confident that we will join together to address these unique challenges. If you have any questions regarding school reopening, please contact Dr. Tamarah Pfeiffer, BIE Chief Academic Officer, at [tamarah.pfeiffer@bie.edu](mailto:tamarah.pfeiffer@bie.edu) or by phone at (202) 631-4074.

Sincerely,



Tara Sweeney  
Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs