



Back-to-School 2020-2021 Action Plan





Dear Mercy Community,

Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy, stated “No work of charity can be more productive of good to society than the careful instruction of women.” As we move through these challenging times surrounding COVID-19, our priority has to be the health and well-being of our students, faculty and staff while ensuring the careful instruction of our Mercy Girls. The American Academy of Pediatrics “Strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school.. Policies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within schools must be balanced with the known harms to children, adolescents, families and the community by keeping children at home.”

Guided by these two standards, as well as advice and recommendations by the Nebraska Department of Education, Archdiocese of Omaha Catholic Schools Office, and Douglas County Health Department, we are sharing our current plans for the upcoming school year. While we do not know exactly what the return in the fall might look like, we are committed to the safety, health, and education of every member of our Mercy community.

Committees have been hard at work over the summer researching the best options for education. At the same time, we are instituting procedures to minimize health risks and organizing our school operations and precautions to assure safety. We have created three possible scenarios for beginning school on August 13. No matter which scenario we are in, know that school is going to look and feel different this fall. Each scenario can be adapted if pandemic conditions warrant.



As of August 4, 2020

Scenario 1: All Students and Faculty in the Building Full Time

At this time, conditions are such that this option is not viable. Health procedures will be rigorous and will follow current safety guidelines. All students, staff and faculty will wear masks and be asked to remain at least six feet apart throughout the school day. Students will carry their own water bottles. Stairwells will go back to one-way stairwells, like they were back in the 1970s. Thanks to recent updates, we are thankful our air conditioning and ventilation system provides us with recommended ventilation for our classrooms. Water bottle fillers will be available, but drinking fountains will be closed. All-school and large group meetings will be limited in size and large parent meetings will probably not occur. Of course, as we monitor the news and receive additional guidance from educational leadership, our plans will be updated.

Scenario 2: Half of the Students and All Faculty in the Building on Assigned Days (current plan)

If health authorities limit the numbers of students or increased spacing between students is recommended, our plan will have students attending two days per week according to an alphabetic division. Our aim is to have classes half-full throughout the day and reduce the number of students an individual student encounters every day. One day per week will be devoted to online classes for all students. Those days that students are not physically in class, they will be attending school all day through Zoom meetings during every class period. The safety features above will be in practice.

Scenario 3: All Students and Faculty in Full Online Learning

Although this is our least favorite scenario, we will be guided by health officials and educational leadership on whether it is safe to come back to school. This approach will be similar to what our students experienced last spring. We solicited student and parent feedback on our online learning efforts and will be making some adjustments. Some of those changes include adjusting the number of synchronous class meetings and focusing on higher attendance at those class meetings.

School Policies

Obviously, our goal is to safely have students in class as much as possible this school year. Masks will be required when students are in our building for scenarios 1 and 2. There will not be “uniform” masks, and each family should plan to purchase at least five masks to ensure students will be able to wear a clean mask each day of the week. Mercy will provide one cloth mask for each student. Lunches, under either scenario 1 or 2 will look different, with students most likely eating in classrooms. Right now, catering and microwaves will not be available under any of these plans.

There are several other policy revisions we are considering before the beginning of the school year. Our plan is to communicate those before the new year begins.



Cleaning/Sanitation

Handwashing remains one of the greatest defenders against the spread of COVID-19. All students and teachers will be encouraged to frequently wash their hands and use hand sanitizer provided in every classroom. In addition, desks in the classrooms will be cleaned multiple times per day and sanitized every evening. Commonly used areas will be cleaned throughout the day.

Sports

Sports practices and competitions will be held in accordance with Nebraska Schools Activities Association (NSAA) guidelines. (provide link)

Fine Arts Activities

Fine Arts activities will be held in accordance with guidelines used for the school day.

Technology

Our faculty did an amazing job of pivoting from in-person learning, to online learning with three days to prepare last spring. We were fortunate that technology and its support has been a fundamental element of our school's strategic plan. They made the absolute best of a very challenging situation. After analyzing student and teacher surveys, we have made some changes to the technology that students and teachers will be using during the upcoming school year, whether we are in school or not.

One of the great blessings that we had during the abrupt shutdown after spring break last year is that all of our students had their own iPads to use during the closure. We learned some valuable technology lessons. Google Classroom became a primary learning management system (LMS). We also had the opportunity to purchase Canvas, a much more powerful LMS, at a discounted rate this summer through a program from the State of Nebraska. In addition, we have purchased school licenses for Zoom and EdPuzzle for teachers to use as they develop their courses for the next year. These technology changes are designed to improve student success.

We are also using federal funding to purchase new iPads and tripods for our teachers to help make blended/distance learning more productive. Our hope is that we can make our classes even more engaging for our students.

Social/Emotional Well-Being

We learned last spring that it was very difficult for our students, faculty and staff to be apart. We are social beings so even the most introverted members of our community felt that loss of companionship during the day. Faculty is also looking at additional plans on how we can make us feel more connected, even if we have to be apart.

To that end we have been able to secure access to a licensed mental health professional from Catholic Charities for two full days a week this year, as opposed to one half day last year. This is being provided from generous benefactors as well as through use of federal program funding.



Flexibility

The last few months have taught us the value of flexibility. We will continue to monitor the situation and listen to the guidance of professionals in the healthcare community. We encourage all of our families to help prevent the further spread of COVID-19 in our community by following health and safety guidelines such as wearing masks in public and avoiding crowded events where many people are not wearing masks.

Resources

Here are several resources for you concerning staying healthy during this time:

Planning Considerations from the American Academy of Pediatrics

<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

Masks

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html>

Social Distancing

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html>

Coping with Stress

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

Latest COVID-19 News from the CDC

https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2Findex.html



Committee Members: We appreciate all of these faculty, staff and Board members who volunteered to give their time during their summer break to work together to prepare for a successful launch to the 2020-2021 school year. Their input and perspectives were invaluable as we shaped this plan.

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