Wednesday, July 1, 2020

**Pueblo District 70 School Board adopts new budget, preps plans for Return to School**

During a special meeting Tuesday night, the D70 Board of Education officially adopted its 2020-2021 Budget for the next school year. The budget was severely impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic and the decrease in education funding from the State of Colorado. The new District budget accounts for a 5.1% decrease in state student funding, equaling a $3.84 million dollar drop of available funds for the District in the upcoming school year. The District tasked each school to cut 10% of their building expenses and the central administrative office reduced their budget by nearly 25%. The budget was balanced by $2.448 million in cuts from schools and administration areas, along with the transfers of $680,000 from other District funds and $722,000 out of the Reserve Fund.

“It took us nearly 10 years to build our budget back after the 2008-2009 recession,” said CFO and Director of Business Services TJ Vinci. “We have a 5% cut this year and we expect at least another 5% state cut next year as well if the State follows the same pattern.”

Other budget savings were realized from a special retirement incentive package recently sent to employees and the liquidation of some District vehicles. Employees will not receive a step increase, but the Board did renew the additional $75 monthly employee insurance contribution. Reductions to student programs were kept to a minimum.

“It is important to note that no programs have been cut,” Superintendent Ed Smith told the Board. “We know that a lot of our D70 parents send their children to our schools based on the programs we offer, especially at the high school level. We may have lessened the number of classes offered, but we have not eliminated elective programs.”

The District recently received $5 million dollars in Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) funds and $800,000 from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER Fund) through the State of Colorado. Those funds are strictly limited to the purchase of pandemic-related emergency supplies, equipment and personnel and cannot be used to fill budget gaps. District officials are compiling lists of items to procure with the one-time stimulus money and will then submit those lists to the State for approval.

School Board members also received updates from District administrators on the current status of Return to School plans.
D70 plans to begin school on Monday, August 17, 2020 for in-person learning across all grade levels. Officials point out that those goals are contingent on rules and regulations from the Governor’s Office and State and Local Health Departments. D70 will have a new and improved remote learning plan in place for those students and families concerned about returning to in-person classes. Students choosing to continue remote learning will see an online curriculum that better matches what is being taught to those students in the classroom.

According to Assistant Superintendent Ginger Andenucio, “We are working with Schoology—which will provide a platform that allows our teachers to upload and share their class content while also allowing students to log in and view classes remotely. We will provide training for teachers in August, but we feel like Schoology is our best option for student learning in school and at home.”

Elementary school students will be back in school—but changes to the PK-5 school day include temperature and symptom checks upon entering the school each morning. Elementary students will remain in a cohort learning groups throughout the day, will have desks spread out in the classroom, and will have frequent breaks for hand washing and sanitizing. Elementary students are encouraged to wear facial coverings as much as possible, especially in areas of large groups—like hallways, lunchrooms, and entering and exiting the school.

D70 Middle and High Schools also plan to be back in-person on Monday, August 17. Grade 6-12 students will be screened upon entry and asked to wear facial coverings in areas where social distancing is not available. But at the secondary level, students could be broken into Hybrid Learning Groups depending on school enrollment size and current health guidelines. Smaller schools might be able to conduct a 4-day in-person school schedule. Larger schools may need to split the student body into two groups—with 50% in-person on two days a week while the other group learns remotely two days per week. This model would only be used at schools where student populations exceed the ability to safely social distance in classrooms and common areas.

The Human Resource Department is working with teachers unable to return to in-person learning due to underlying health conditions. Those teachers will be utilized for teaching online students. All schools will be implementing new and improved sanitation and custodial procedures. In August, teachers will receive health and wellness seminars and will be trained on the new remote learning platforms.

“We’ve tried to think about our Return to School plan from a student point-of-view,” said Director of Student Services Greg Keasling. “Parents are one of the most important steps in our plan. In order to keep our schools virus-free, we need them to help make sure that no student goes to school with COVID-19 symptoms. Our committees then looked at the entire day from home to school to home. How do they get to school? How do they get into the building? Where does that student go? Who do they interact with? What needs to be cleaned and when? How do we handle meals? Hallways, lockers, books, shared technology, etc. It is a daunting task, but we have great groups of staff, parents, and administrators doing their best to think of all the possible solutions.”

Any student grades K-12 that wishes to continue Remote Learning may choose to do so when school begins August 17. Families can choose that option when registering or updating their current school registration.
“We are working to create a Return to School plan based on a lot of unknowns right now,” remarked Smith. “We don’t know when the Governor will issue his guidance for schools to return to in-person learning. We don’t know exactly how many total students will be allowed in the school at any given time and we don’t know how many students will be allowed on a school bus. But we do know that having students in school is important to their social and emotional well-being, and we need to keep the health and safety of our staff and students as our top priority. We have a lot of parents who work locally, and they also need our schools open for economic reasons. That’s the direction we are heading right now, and we will adjust as needed with guidance from State and Local health officials.”

“Our plans allow us to open 100%, 50%, 10% or 0% depending on the current pandemic situation,” added Keasling. “And we feel that we can move between those models on a school or district level fairly quickly depending on local conditions.”

D70 is sending out a parent feedback form via email in the next few days where parents can review the current Return to School options and provide input and ideas.

For the latest information – visit our website at www.district70.org

MEDIA: For more information – contact Todd Seip – D70 PIO at tseip@district70.org