

Veritas Academy of Tucson

BIOSECURITY PROPOSAL



OUR PLAN TO RETURN TO SCHOOL

AUGUST 2020

INTRODUCTION

School closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are taking a toll on our children's development and social well-being, in fact, they have the potential to be generationally catastrophic when compared to summer closures or previous impacts we have experienced post 9/11 or during the Great Recession.

The abrupt transition from in-school learning to remote virtual learning that occurred on March 13, 2020, created turmoil in the education system as schools and districts scrambled to implement alternative teaching and learning models. While Veritas Academy of Tucson was able to quickly transition to an on-line platform, we still faced challenges.

- Many of our teachers did not have the expertise for the challenge of on-line teaching and learning.
- Many of our families do not have access to high-speed Internet at home or had enough devices to be on-line concurrently.
- Students have a limited appetite for hours of computer-driven instruction.
- Parents stated they had difficulty helping their children with schoolwork and/or creating routines at home that facilitated learning. This was complicated by working-from-home parents needing access to computers and WiFi as well.
- One of the single most important elements to overall success was the ability for parents to stay at home.

This pandemic is affecting every domain of our lives and, it is traumatic. Children—poor children especially—will bear the burden of the attendant social and economic shocks. Every facet of a child's life is being disrupted and schools are uniquely placed to provide stability, comfort, and security during the months and years to come. That is, if we are allowed to do so. Veritas Academy of Tucson believes children should be protected from harm and we believe that schools, with thoughtful planning and well-implemented health and safety measures, can provide an environment where the rewards of attending school outweigh the risk.

Children need school and, without access to our services, they are paying the price. Since closing in March 2020, students across the country have faced a growing number of challenges:

MENTAL HEALTH

A recent survey found the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures have had negative impacts on students. The survey of 11,000 K-12 students conducted by EVERFI, an education technology company, found:

- 51% of respondents said they felt more stressed
- 39% reported feeling more lonely now, and
- 38% expressed greater concern about their well-being

Other major themes were the possible or actual loss of loved ones; a hyper-awareness of health; grieving for the loss or changes in rites of passage; and on-going isolation, fear and uncertainty.¹

Historically, when a student is grieving the loss of a loved one, experiencing trauma, or dealing with life issues, school and their classmates are often a place of solace and support. Schools are environments where people know what is going on with a student, can rally around them, and provide that support. This cannot and was not able to be done in an on-line format.

CHILD ABUSE

Recent articles in NPR (April 28, 2020)² and USA Today (May 13, 2020)³ provide a grim reminder that our most vulnerable children are not safe at home. Schools have always been one set of eyes on children and, as mandatory reporters, we are trained to look for signs of physical and sexual abuse. The coronavirus outbreak has sidelined most mandated reporters and children are paying the price. According to the article, advocates say they are responding to more physical abuse cases than ever before, and they are more severe; children who were being sexually abused once or twice a week are being abused more now; and, many experts from pediatricians, hospitals, and child advocates are saying “the worst is yet to come.”

ACADEMICS

An April 2020 article in Education Week⁴, boldly stated “academically speaking, the ‘COVID Slide’ could be a lot worse than you think.” The article, citing a report issued by the Northwest Evaluation Association, projected that in reading students may only retain about 70% of their reading progress during the closure and in math could lose half to all of their academic growth from last year. Without a strong, focused instructional initiative in the upcoming school year we may see learning gaps widened and an ongoing negative impact throughout the remainder of a student’s academic career. A June 2018 study of *The Long-run Effects of Teacher Strikes: Evidence from Argentina*⁵, found that students, now in their thirties, who had lost 80 to 90 days of school due to a teacher’s strike, were still experiencing a negative impact on their incomes.

Administrators at Resurrection Christian Schools in Colorado, a school with a track record of on-line education at the K-12 level since 2005, said, “We can tell you with certainty, children cannot take on a full day’s worth of content on a daily/weekly basis. In many cases, during this recent crisis, children received perhaps as much as 70% and as little as 40% of the content coverage they should have received.” This loss of content and constricted instructional delivery will have long-term consequences that will ripple through Arizona’s educational system for many years to come and will cost schools significantly more in terms of resources to even attempt to catch children up.

¹ Schaffhauser, D., Research: Students Feeling Stressed; So Are Their Teachers. *The Journal: Transforming Education Through Technology*. May 2020.

² Kamenetz, A. *Child Sexual Abuse Reports are on the Rise Amid Lockdown Orders*. NPR, April 28, 2020.

³ Woodall, C. *As Hospitals See More Severe Child Abuse Injuries During Coronavirus, ‘The Worst is Yet to Come.’* USA Today, May 13, 2020.

⁴ Sparks, S. *Academically Speaking, the ‘COVID Slide’ Could Be a Lot Worse Than You Think*. Education Week, April 9, 2020.

⁵ Jaume, D. and Willen, A., *The Long-run Effects of Teacher Strikes: Evidence from Argentina*. CEDLAS, Working Papers 0217, CEDLAS, Universidad Nacional de La Plata.

Even more important to the question of the timing of reopening, the beginning of the school year is a very critical time to have the strongest start of the school year. Last year at the time of the shutdown, teachers had cultivated strong relationships with their students, developed mutual trust, learned their idiosyncrasies and learning needs, and had covered 3/4s of the year's concepts, having laid a solid foundation from which to build from. As a new year begins, none of this exists. Teachers and students are strangers and students are beginning from the typical end-of-the-summer deficit. Virtual learning is not the way to overcome these deficits.

An additional area often overlooked by decision-makers is the extreme workloads being placed on teachers. They are being asked to handle the additional health regulatory requirements along with being stretched thin by reduced funding and having to teach both in on-line and face-to-face instruction. In an exclusive USA TODAY/Ipsos poll, 1 in 5 teachers say they are unlikely to go back to school if their classrooms reopen in the fall, a potential massive wave of resignations. Though most teachers report working more than usual, nearly two-thirds say they haven't been able to properly do their jobs in an educational system upended by the coronavirus. Such turnover will cause massive waves of disruption and discontinuity of instruction.

SAFETY AND CHILDCARE

As the nation pushes to reopen, parents across the country are asking "who will watch our children?" With the closure of schools, the lack of childcare is quickly emerging as one of the biggest barriers to restarting the economy and one of the biggest challenges facing our hourly wage earners. In many school communities, the burden placed on families of finding affordable or alternative childcare options is exacerbating already existing inequities in the childcare system because inherently wealthier families have more options. For many of our families, school is the only choice they have. Do they risk the loss of a paycheck or do they leave their children alone and unattended? **Our state cannot successfully reopen with kids still at home.** Glib and nearly cavalier state directives of schools simply "creating blended models" of one sort or another is absolutely tone-deaf. The ONLY thing that made remote/on-line work this spring was the fact that our parents were home with their children. As *The Economist* (April 30, 2020) encouraged us to do, "*consider the cost of barring children from the classroom. No amount of helicopter parenting or videoconferencing can replace real-life teachers, or the social skills acquired in the playground. Even in the countries best prepared for e-learning, such as South Korea, virtual school is less good than the real thing.*"

ECONOMY

In an April 30, 2020 article, *The Economist* magazine stated, "...schools have striven to remain open during wars, famines, and even storms. The extent and length of school closures now happening in the rich world are unprecedented. The costs are horrifying. Most immediately, having to take care of children limits the productivity of parents. But in the long run that will be dwarfed by the amount of lost learning. Those costs will fall most heavily on those children who are most in need of education. Without interventions the effects could last a lifetime."⁶

RE-OPENING VERITAS ACADEMY OF TUCSON IN AUGUST 2020

In re-opening Veritas Academy of Tucson, we acknowledge that bringing together large numbers of individuals may result in some COVID-19 cases, however with clear and actionable guidance for safe operations we will be able to minimize the risk to students, staff, and the public. According to the World Health Organization in a March 2020 report, *maintaining safe school operations or reopening schools after a closure requires many considerations but, if done well, can promote public health.*⁷

⁶ The Economist. *When Easing Lockdowns, Governments Should Open Schools First.* April 30, 2020.

⁷ *Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools, March 2020. Inter-Agency Standing Committee (UNICEF, WHO, IFRC)*

In a recent article published in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, Professor Russell Viner (University College London Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health and President of the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health) said, “we know from previous studies that school closures are likely to have the greatest effect if the virus has low transmissibility and attack rates are higher in children. This is the opposite of COVID-19.” The article goes on to say **school closures do not appear** to have a significant effect on the spread of infections such as COVID-19, suggesting that they may prevent only 2-4 percent of deaths (which is less than the impact of other physical distancing⁸ interventions) but will be crucial to how we restart society.⁹ Additional research has shown a very, very low transmission from children to children and children to adults.¹⁰

Our Position

Without a clear consensus on the role of youth in the transmission of COVID-19, a lack of clarity on COVID-19's future (small outbreaks, a monster wave, or a persistent crisis), an undetermined date for a viable vaccine, and, the realization that if we do not get kids actively engaged in the education and socialization process of school we could be condemning them to a life of on-going economic struggles, we have no other option but to act now. We are a very small school of about 170 students. Our campus is on one site and physically laid out in a way that is easy to contain and control. We do not have multiple, sprawling campuses like larger, public schools. In addition, Veritas Academy of Tucson has built-in singularities that make our school well equipped to have a healthy environment:

- Small class sizes with 6' physical distancing available in many classrooms
- Exterior corridors for student traffic
- A reduced campus schedule that achieves a reduction in student-student and teacher-student contact over the course of a school week. Most students (K-6) will only be on campus two days per week and only one-fifth on campus for three days per week.
- Outside lunch area with students divided into lunch cohorts of less than 35 students each.
- Converting unused and underused parts of our campus into classrooms and hiring of extra teachers to expand the number of small classes with physical distancing.
- Capabilities for online virtual synchronous classes for those students or families that are at high risk for the CoronaVirus.
- A strongly engaged group of parents very committed to the health of the entire school family.

Therefore, we do not believe a “one size fits all” approach to school health mandates is appropriate. We believe we must take the information we have at hand, implement safety and social precautions to the best of our ability, **but we must get students back in school—all students for a full-school year.**

For schools, this no different than our planning for an active shooter, a fire, or other crisis event. Planning for re-opening schools takes a thoughtful, multi-disciplinary approach. Among our various security threats, **biosecurity** is just the latest challenge schools are asked to confront as we try to strike a balance between security and student engagement.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES IN REOPENING OUR SCHOOL

The overriding principles in our reopening plan are:

⁸ In this proposal, you will note that Veritas Academy uses the term “physical distancing” since this is what is meant by the more commonly-used term of social distancing. We, as a school community, are not trying to train people to social distance, I.E. to pull away from social contact. We are inherently and positively social creatures. Our goal is physical distancing so that our social contact can remain positive and healthy.

⁹ Viner, R. and Ward, J. *School Closure and Management Practices During Coronavirus Outbreaks including COVID-19: A Rapid Systemic Review*. The Lancet, Vol. 4, Issue 5, April 2020.

¹⁰Two articles in the Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics:

<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2020/05/22/peds.2020-1576.full.pdf>

<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2020/05/22/peds.2020-004879.full.pdf>

- The safety and wellbeing of students, staff, and community continues to be a priority.
- To minimize the risk that someone becomes infected in the first place with rapid, comprehensive and aggressive quarantining; beginning in the home.
- Consistent and immediate communication with county health officials.
- Maximize the ability for contact tracing by ensuring we assist the county and help identify and contact anyone who has been in close contact with individuals who have been infected. To this end, and to assist in partnering with the county, VAT is developing protocols for health screenings before entering campus and uniform seating and attendance charts to follow student cohorts on campus. This will enable us to better record daily health and safety issues and student interactions. As a result, we will be greatly enhancing the ability to conduct contact tracing among other improved health and safety functions.
- As mentioned above, to the extent practicable, in-person learning will provide physical distancing and reduced group size/capacity loads in each classroom and/or building.
- To open school as close to “normal” as possible to provide familiarity and stability for our students.

KEY IMPLEMENTATIONS AS WE OPEN IN FALL 2020

The actions below outline how we are redesigning our organization to successfully reopen our schools in Fall 2020. Our strategic goal is to provide in-building **instruction for every student** utilizing the University Model™ schedule, in a structure that is as close to “normal” as can be achieved.

ADAPT SCHOOL POLICIES WHERE APPROPRIATE

- Review and revise attendance policies to encourage students and staff to stay home when sick or caring for sick family members.
- Require all families who participate with our in-person schooling to sign a community covenant indicating they understand that health and safety expectations under COVID-19 will be amplified and that noncompliance with the State and County’s health orders may affect their attendance at VAT.
- Place on hiatus recognition such as perfect attendance and/or other incentives to physically come to school.
- Have flexible calendar policies and on-line instructional capabilities to allow for quick and smooth transitions between in-person and remote learning in case of temporary school closures.

SICK STUDENTS AND STAFF SHOULD NOT COME TO SCHOOL

- All students and staff will go through a mandatory health screening before entering school. This will include:
 - Beginning with home health checks so that ill children are not placed in carpools or arrive on campus. These home health checks will include questions related to contact with COVID-19 individuals.
 - In-person temperature check.
 - Oral response to a checklist of symptom-related questions.
- Students exhibiting any symptoms while at school will be quarantined on-site until parents are able to remove the child from school.

- An informational campaign, targeting parents, on the symptoms to look for in their children and/or the contact-related concerns will be on-going throughout the year.
- Active monitoring of school attendance to monitor trends in symptoms/reasons for absence(s).

TARGETED HEALTH PRECAUTIONS

- Students will be grouped in cohorts with teachers going to the student when possible and/or practicable.
- Physical distancing will be observed and masks will be required in situations where a consistent 6' distance cannot be consistently maintained. As each building and classroom is unique in terms of space and infrastructure, physical distancing will be flexible, but will be implemented to the fullest practicable level.
- Regular hand washing will be required and encouraged with periodic campus-wide signage and trainings.

DEVELOP INFORMATION-SHARING SYSTEMS

- Biosecurity will be a function subsumed by administrative staff, teachers and VAT Community Health Aides.
- The administrative team will review absenteeism patterns looking for student/staff absenteeism due to respiratory illness.
- Members of the biosecurity team will be trained in contact tracing to assist us in identifying students, families, or classrooms of concern.
- Veritas Academy will appoint a COVID-19 contact person to communicate directly with the Pima County Health Department.

SAFE LEARNING SPACES

To the extent possible, we will minimize the number of students and staff each individual interacts with during the course of the school day. We will implement other healthy measures including those mentioned below.

- Students shall not change from one group to another (as practicable).
- Where practicable, groups shall be in a separate room/programming area and shall not mix with each other.
- Staff shall remain solely with one group of children throughout the course of the day (as practicable).
- If children rotate from one space to another, the room & equipment will need to be cleaned and sanitized prior to having another group.
- Reduce the number of shared items. Students will be expected to have their own school supplies, and these will be kept individually in their desk, backpack, cubby or other container.
- Adequate supplies to minimize sharing of high-touch materials will be provided (i.e., art supplies, science equipment, etc.). Supplies and equipment will be used by one group of students at a time and then will be cleaned and disinfected between uses.
- To the extent possible, physical distancing will be observed.
- Hand sanitizer stations and hand washing stations will be readily available in classrooms and commons areas.
- Additional cleaning and decontamination will occur throughout the facility on a consistent basis.

ATHLETICS AND OTHER POTENTIALLY HIGH-RISK ACTIVITIES SPORTS

As Governor Ducey began to take steps toward re-opening Arizona, he provided directives to allow for the safe resumption of youth sports. After reviewing these guidelines as well as additional guidance from the CDC, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and USA Volleyball, Veritas Academy Athletics has created a protocol that is in compliance with these guidelines and enforced at open gyms, practices, and camps. The protocol includes:

- Screening of athletes for symptoms of COVID-19 and temperature check at home prior to leaving for practice. Results reported to head coach prior to practice. Screening of coaches in the same manner.
- Drive through drop off and pick up for athletes. No spectators.
- Sanitizing of hands at the start of practice and sanitizing of the facility and equipment before and after practices, as well as between groups of athletes.
- Provision of hand sanitizer for use at designated times during practice.
- Maintaining six feet of distance between players during teaching times and selecting drills that allow for this as much as feasible.
- Eliminating physical contact between players as much as possible.
- Improved ventilation and airflow for indoor athletics.

After-school sports will require a revision of these guidelines for athletes coming to practice and games from school rather than from home. Cleaning protocols will remain the same and students will continue to be screened either at school or at home prior to being allowed to practice.

The athletic leagues or teams with whom Veritas participates will need to determine appropriate protocols to govern competitions between schools and will need to include similar considerations for screening, spectators, athlete/coach distancing, mask use, and sanitizing of facilities.

Governor Ducey's guidelines:

https://azgovernor.gov/sites/default/files/guidance_for_organized_youth_events_0_0.pdf

CHOIR

- All students will have their temperature checked prior to the start of each class (an additional screening beyond the start-of-school-day screening).
- Extra physical distancing beyond 6' will be observed as much as practicable.
- No singing in circles (activity increases spread).
- No sharing of music, each student will be responsible for his/her own music notebook. Project music on screens when practicable.

PLAYGROUNDS

- Students will be kept in cohort groups and assigned designated areas on the playground and/or fields.
- Students will be trained to proactively sanitize their hands (Operation Safe Hands) prior to touching balls and any other shared play and playground equipment.
- Encourage students to participate in touch-free activities such as jumping rope, hula hoops, hopscotch, kicking a soccer ball, running and other similar activities.
- Due to the effects of sunlight on COVID-19 and the requirements of children sanitizing hands prior to using the playground equipment, children will be allowed access to equipment. Playground surfaces will also be sanitized by the VAT Community Health Aides.

MEASURES TO PREVENT CROWDS FROM GATHERING

- Health screenings will be done at three different gates with families assigned to these gates to spread out congestion at the entrances. Physical distancing will be required.
- School lunch periods have been divided into smaller groups and subdivided into cohorts separated from other cohorts or in supervised groups outdoors when the weather permits.
- Students will be allowed to walk on the grass to add separation when passing on the outdoor sidewalks.
- If necessary for appropriate distancing, recess will be staggered for different groups.
- Morning assembly, Lauds, will be in the outdoor courtyard with physical distancing between classes and within each class.
- Limits will be placed on non-essential visitors and their access to our campus.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Veritas Academy of Tucson's Biosecurity Plan presented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic provides a level of security that will afford a healthy learning environment for our students. The plan is based on the premise that there are things a rational organization can do to limit the havoc wrought by the virus and that we need to do as many of them as we can while still preserving a level of social services that provides students with future opportunities, supports the economy, and contributes to the health and well-being of our society in general. As we reopen our school; we will do so by establishing public trust and managing fear and perceptions of risk. Addressing community needs are key to a successful and effective crisis response.

In summary our plan will:

- Maximize the separation of cohorts to allow for early identification and isolation of students exposed to, or exhibiting symptoms of, COVID-19.
- Institute contact tracing protocols to catch exposure early and reduce the risk of a school-wide exposure.
- Continue physical distancing, to the extent practicable, as we return to and continue in-person instruction at Veritas Academy of Tucson throughout the 2020-21 school year.
- Require PPE in various applications and situations and personal hygiene regimens for students and staff.
- Reduce the number of non-essential individuals in our schools.
- Institute a cleaning regime that is frequent, targeted, and of a scope sufficient to reduce the on-going transmission of the virus.
- Entail creativity and flexibility in scheduling to stagger recess and lunchtimes to reduce "crowd" size and keep students separated.
- Improve communication between the district and local/state health officials.

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