

New Bedford Public Schools starts next phase of safely increasing in-person instruction

New Bedford Public Schools is set to launch the next phase of increased in-person instruction in classrooms, Superintendent Thomas Anderson announced at a press conference today. This new phase in the district's year-long comprehensive response to prioritize the health and safety of all students and staff will start on Monday, March 1, 2021, beginning initially with seven elementary schools – Carney, Gomes, Hayden-McFadden, Renaissance, Rodman, Taylor and Winslow. Each school has been working with their parent community for the notification of which grade levels. Superintendent Anderson stated, “We are excited to be able to expand Cohort A, which has been 5-days in-person since September. This expansion will include a range of grades, but the priority starts with Kindergarten and First Grade. Schools are assessing class sizes, space, and other factors to consider other grades. An additional six schools are expected to be ready on March 8 with others to follow on the subsequent weeks.”

Mayor Jon Mitchell acknowledged the extensive planning and preparation required to increase in-person instruction. “Returning to in-person instruction is important for our students’ education and well-being, and thanks to thoughtful, deliberate planning by our schools, it will be done safely for students and staff. This has been a challenging year for everyone, including students and their families, and returning to safe in-person instruction is a positive step as we move further toward returning to normal,” said Mayor Mitchell.

Superintendent Anderson noted, “Our plan to expand Cohort A

students will allow for students who are already in school 2-days per week – those in Cohorts B/C – to participate in 5-days of in-person learning beginning as early as March 1, 2021 for several elementary schools. All current requirements including CDC and DESE guidance will remain in place. This expansion will first prioritize elementary students with the highest needs and at the earliest grades. There will be no changes to Cohort D – the fully distance cohort at this time.”

All health measures will remain strictly enforced. The current 6-foot distancing and proper airflow will continue to dictate the number of students who will be placed in classrooms. “Increased in-person instruction will not look the same for all schools and schools cannot be compared to one another in how their logistics will be addressed. For example, available classroom space in schools vary based on several factors including room configurations with cabinets, desk sizes, etc.”, Superintendent Anderson said.

Districtwide mitigation strategies are effective, including mask wearing, which will remain a requirement of attendance, as well as frequent handwashing and sanitizing in addition to the continual disinfecting process currently being used in schools. More than 800 air exchange units – air scrubbers were placed in classrooms at the start of the school year enabling 9,000 student students to receive in-person learning this school year.

Noting that COVID-19 rates have been declining in New Bedford, with the percent of positivity decreasing for more than the last 6 weeks to approximately 5.4% percent, Superintendent Anderson noted, “We are moving with a sense of urgency to Prevent, Recover, and Accelerate student learning. This is our intense focus as schools are identifying learning gaps to minimize learning loss. To recover by assisting to remediate those students who need support – academically and socio-emotionally) AND accelerate – push those students who are already proficient to maximize their strengths.

“Over these last twelve months our priority has remained the same – balance the health and safety needs of all students and staff and while working to ensure that our academic program remains strong.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for reopening schools state that schools can provide in-person instruction when they implement protocols that prevent the spread of COVID-19, maintain healthy environments and healthy operations, and have preparations in place for any members of the school community who may contract COVID-19. New Bedford Public Schools as of late January has been the largest school district in Massachusetts to retain in-person instruction in a hybrid model since the beginning of the current school year.

The press conference was held at the Alfred J. Gomes Elementary School and attended by city and school officials.