

Pandemic Restrictions are an Opportunity for Community Strength On Thursday August 13, the School Board of ISD 166 voted to set the base learning model for school year 2020-2021 as Distance Learning. This means that the school year will begin in a Distance Learning model. Cook County Schools Distance Learning 2.0 is rigorous, consistent, and safe. It has been designed with careful consideration of needed improvements over emergency distance learning conducted last spring and with the feedback of all stakeholders in the community. This does not mean that we will be in Distance Learning forever. It does not mean that we will be in Distance Learning all school year.

We have a very thorough and optimistic plan, but there is still much work to do to prepare for the start of the school year. The school community and the greater Cook County community are working hard on the details and coming together to make it a successful start to an uncertain year. I've been heartened to already see multiple examples of the community creating opportunities for supporting students and families during this time.

A tenant of School Board operations is that decisions are made on a majority basis and the entire Board supports the results and moves forward together in good faith. And by extension the school moves forward together, too.

Distance Learning is not easy. It was not an easy decision for the Board to make. It will not be easy for the teachers and support staff to execute, and it will not be easy for families. Even though it will be different and challenging at times, there are silver linings that we should also appreciate. Extra time with our kids. The chance to engage more regularly with their teachers. A flexible schedule.

Kids are resilient. Distance Learning will help them build even more grit into their character; a trait that will serve them in whatever they pursue in their lives. This experience can build more resilience and grit in us all. It's up to all of us to set the tone for our community's children. Let's foster this as an opportunity, and work together to support those for whom it is a challenge. This experience will put our rural Cook County values to work - we will figure it out and persevere, together.

Distance Learning will also allow us to ease into the school year in a manner where we can control the most variables. By beginning in the most restrictive model, we will be able to transition to hybrid and in-person learning in a controlled and safe manner. It has been shown time and time-again during this pandemic that opening too quickly and too aggressively has not gone well and resulted in much more illness, setting communities even farther back and creating longer, harsher restrictions. So far, Cook County has taken a very measured approach and has benefited from that.

Our shared objective is to have kids return to the classroom as soon as possible. We need them to return under circumstances where we can reasonably expect they will remain there for the long term. This is the first step in that process.

Thank you administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, students and community members for joining together in this effort. It takes a village.

Dan Shirley  
School Board Chair  
Cook County Schools ISD 166