



# United States Department of the Interior

## BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION

Washington, D.C. 20240

August 21, 2020

Dear School Leaders, Parents/Guardians and Students,

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been the Bureau of Indian Education's (BIE) goal to provide continuity of education for all BIE students. BIE continues to strive for excellence in teaching and learning. As a follow-up to [BIE tribal consultation held on July 9, 10, and 14, 2020 regarding school reopening](#), I am pleased to share with you BIE's School Reopening Plan, *Return to Learn!*, referred to herein as the Plan. As we open our doors, we are providing many resources to support and prepare our students, staff and families for the 2020-2021 school year. By August 26, 2020, there will be a link on the BIE website ([www.bie.edu](http://www.bie.edu)) dedicated to the reopening of the 2020-2021 school year.

BIE has been actively preparing for the start of the 2020-2021 school year for several months. As you know and have experienced, it has been challenging and complex. The Department of the Interior (Department), Indian Affairs, and BIE are actively involved in supporting the federal response to COVID-19. BIE, through Indian Affairs, brought together a strategic team that included experts from the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), Indian Health Service, and tribal leadership to ensure we had access to a broad range of expertise in putting together the Plan.

We pulled resources from within the Department and Indian Affairs enterprises to support this overall effort. Working with these strategic teams we examined the options for teaching and learning in a COVID-19 pandemic environment through the lens of equity and excellence, the Strategic Direction, as well as prioritizing the health and safety of our students and staff members. We continue to collaborate with states and other federal agencies including the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, Agriculture, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and experts from the DoDEA school system for best practices.

Further, the guidance in this letter only pertains to Bureau-operated schools. However, BIE recommends tribally-controlled schools operated pursuant to a grant under the Tribally Controlled Schools Act of 1988 (25 U.S.C. § 2501 et seq.) or pursuant to a contract under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (25 U.S.C. § 5301 et seq.) take the recommendations included as guidance to inform general operations and to prepare each learning environment for the 2020-2021 school year. Any tribally-controlled school that may wish to deviate from this guidance, or decide not to reopen, should consult with its legal counsel to ensure it does not risk violating the terms of its grant.

## **START DATE**

**September 16, 2020.** Based on initial feedback collected through formal tribal consultation and stakeholder surveys, BIE-operated K-12 schools will use a uniform start date of September 16, 2020 for the 2020-2021 school year. This will provide schools additional time to prepare for the safe return of students and staff while following CDC Guidelines for opening schools. Students more effectively learn and grow while attending school during in-person academic instruction. BIE is also better able to ensure continuity in student academic services and enrichment when students are present at school.

- To the maximum extent possible, BIE schools will operate as brick and mortar schools for the 2020-2021 school year. Schools will have a range of options for scheduling students, e.g., full-time attendance, rotational schedule with reduced class sizes, and reduced number of students in the buildings. School leaders will make local in coordination their respective BIE Education Program Administrator (EPA), tribes, states and local public health officials.
- BIE schools will be ready to transition to a distance learning model if COVID-19 spread leads to a shutdown of schools. For anticipated closures of five or fewer days, there is no requirement to switch to full-time distance learning.
- Families with health vulnerabilities related to COVID-19 will be provided a virtual platform to continue learning remotely.
- Families without the capability to connect to a virtual platform will be provided an alternative education program.

## **REOPENING PLAN & NEXT STEPS**

BIE, through its School Reopening Task Force (Task Force) gathered tribal consultation comments and stakeholder survey responses to inform the Plan. The Plan will provide school leaders with general guidance and protocols for educational continuity within a safe and healthy environment for BIE students.

School leaders will work with their respective BIE EPA to coordinate with local tribes to implement school specific plans for the start of the school year. Each school, in coordination with their EPAs and tribal leaders, will have the flexibility to implement the guidelines in a manner that best meets the health and safety needs of students and staff while minimizing the impact on teaching and learning. Where needed, schools will solicit support from the Department's leadership, through their respective chain of command, to overcome obstacles towards achieving their goals.

School leaders will provide educators professional development that supports them in being effective instructional leaders in a COVID-19 environment. They will receive training and the protocols essential for establishing and maintaining safe and healthy school environments that reduce the risk of COVID-19 for students and staff. School leaders will incorporate risk mitigation measures and prepare facilities and buses based on the recommendations from BIE's Plan, their respective state's reopening plan, and the latest guidance from the CDC including [CDC's Preparing K-12 School Administrators for a Safe Return to School in Fall 2020](#).

## TOOLKIT

The Task Force is developing a toolkit for each BIE-operated school that will provide resources for school leadership and personnel:

- **Communications** – Key messaging to facilitate communication among schools, tribes, families and their respective communities.
- **Resources** – The Plan and operational guidelines and protocols for a safe and healthy school environment (e.g., wearing of face coverings, hygiene, disinfecting spaces).
- **Checklists** –
  - Physical Distancing at Schools (e.g., classrooms, buses, corridors, playgrounds).
  - Behavioral Health and Well-Being - Resources to support the emotional well-being of students.
  - Reopening Safely - CDC health and safety requirements including training on bloodborne pathogens; use of personal protective equipment (PPE); disinfection; physical distancing in classrooms; retrofitting equipment; assessing water supplies and HVAC systems; food and security options for students; and accommodations for students with special needs.
  - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act - Schools must provide all services pursuant to student individualized education programs through in-person or structured distance learning, with an emphasis on providing in-person instruction to this particularly vulnerable population of students. In response to tribal consultation comments, we will give guidance to make the transition easier for students with special needs
- **Waiver Request Template** - Application to request waivers of 25 CFR Subchapter E requirements
- **Frequently Asked Questions**

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

BIE is utilizing a two-pronged approach to enhance our instructional technology platform.

**Short Term:** BIE, through its partners across Indian Affairs, will provide secure, wireless access in each school, and to the extent possible, for families (via mobile hotspots and Jetpacks). BIE, through its partners across Indian Affairs, will inventory and evaluate the current information technology infrastructure, equipment and curricular requirements (e.g., recommendations for a Learning Management System), and develop a long-term strategy for improvements.

**Long Term:** Inventories and evaluations will help us understand the true connectivity challenges in the communities where BIE schools are located and develop solutions to enhance the integration of technology in our instructional practices to support a virtual learning setting. BIE will work with tribal and school leaders and technology experts to understand the local challenges faced by your school and community. If interested in engaging in this discussion,

please contact Indian Affairs broadband subject matter expert, Stephanie Henning, at: [Stephanie.Henning@bia.gov](mailto:Stephanie.Henning@bia.gov).

## **RESIDENTIAL FACILITIES**

Bureau operated residential facilities, including Off Reservation Boarding Schools (ORBS) and peripheral dormitories, including Bureau-operated residential facilities **will only provide day-school instruction**. This will avoid students traveling from outside the commuting area. Students enrolled for the 2020-2021 school year but outside the commuting area will be provided distance learning opportunities to continue their BIE education. Current residential staff who would normally support 24-hour services at ORBS will continue to work within the BIE facility. Their roles and responsibilities may be modified to support day-school operations.

## **SCHOOL LUNCH**

School leaders are expected to continue coordination with their respective school boards and local tribal governments to provide school lunches. Training will be provided to food service staff to ensure proper safety and food handling protocols are consistent with the Food and Drug Administration guidelines and CDC guidance regarding COVID-19.

## **WAIVER REQUESTS**

Consistent with the [BIE's June 25, 2020 Dear School Leader Letter](#), school leaders may submit a waiver request of any 25 CFR Subchapter E requirements they are unable to meet because of modified school schedule and operations. Approval of any waiver application will be conditioned on assurances of the school's compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, with the submission of a distance learning plan, including assurances for students to access school lunch services. The BIE will provide a waiver request template, which school leaders may use to submit a waiver application. This template will be provided in the Toolkit.

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

For updated information, CDC Guidelines, communication materials, links to documents and the Plan, please visit the BIE website at [www.bie.edu](http://www.bie.edu) and <https://www.bia.gov/covid-19>.

COVID-19 is an unprecedented challenge to our BIE schools, families, tribes and communities on a scale never before experienced. We take seriously our immense responsibility for educating and creating opportunities for every student. The BIE, as well as its partners across Indian Affairs and the Department, stand ready to work alongside our school leaders, tribes, communities, and staff to meet the daily needs of our students and families. If you should have any questions regarding school reopening, please contact the BIE Chief Academic Office directly at [tamarah.pfeiffer@bie.edu](mailto:tamarah.pfeiffer@bie.edu) or by phone at (202) 631-4074.

Sincerely,



Tony L. Dearman  
Director