July Update from Superintendent of Schools Dr. Donna C. Hanlin for the Families, Staff and Community Served by Wicomico County Public Schools:

In my most recent message to school families and staff, as school ended, I promised to be in touch throughout the summer to provide updates as needed. Today I want to tell you about the extensive planning that has taken place already, and that will continue to occur as we all prepare for the 2020-2021 school year.

While school is out of session for the summer, school leaders and school system staff have stocked up on cleaning supplies and PPE, such as masks and disposable gloves, and we have put in place health screening procedures for those entering any building of Wicomico County Public Schools. We have continued to repurpose laptops that were in use at schools for home use, and purchased enough new laptops to ensure a laptop in the fall for every student in Kindergarten through 12th Grade.

We have continued to provide meal bundles for children as we did throughout the spring. Instruction is occurring this summer even though it looks a little different: High school students are taking remedial and original credit classes in our online summer school, middle school students are working on math and English Language Arts skills in our free STAY SHARP program, and elementary and middle school students are exploring a wealth of learning activities through our Wicomico Summer Fun! website.

In these extraordinary times, our school system has been actively planning for the day that everyone can return to school buildings. We need our families to be part of that planning too. Your family will soon receive an email with a link to New School Year Registration so that you can provide your responses in some key areas. It is extremely important that you take this survey as soon as possible for each student in your family, so that our schools and school system have your input as we plan for resuming instruction in early September. School-based staff will receive a link to a Back-to-School Survey to give their feedback.

Let me begin by sharing briefly about the three possible instructional scenarios, or models, that we consider most likely to be in place as the 2020-2021 school year begins. These three scenarios are: all students in school (Green Model), all students taking part in distance learning (Red Model), or a hybrid combination of in-school and at-home learning (Yellow Model).
Stakeholder teams of staff, parents and community members have been working since early June to prepare for the anticipated return to school buildings in September. We have three committees that are focused on the areas of Instruction, Student and Family Services, and Operations, working to prepare for all three scenarios.

It might seem difficult to school families to commit to long-term plans for instruction and transportation now, with much of the summer still ahead of us, but now is when our schools and school system need to do the important work of planning and preparation so the return to school is as smooth and safe as possible.

All plans currently being discussed and proposed by these committees are subject to change given the ever evolving COVID-19 circumstances. But based on the best information available at this point, our school system is focused on planning for these three possible models for instruction for the start of the 2020-2021 school year.

Instruction in the Red Model or Green Model would apply across the board to all students, so these are not options for which input is needed at this time. With New School Year Registration, we will ask parents to consider the hybrid Yellow Model, and to commit either to having a student attend school in a hybrid model or to engaging in instruction through a virtual program. This commitment would be for the full first semester of the 2020-2021 school year.
Red Model: Distance Learning. All instruction conducted online through distance learning platforms. Use of this model would be at the direction of state and local officials, in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. If Wicomico did go to a 100% distance learning model in the 2020-2021 school year, it would look different from the distance learning done in the spring. Students would receive letter grades rather than Pass/Incomplete, and attendance would be monitored. To ensure that students can participate in distance learning, Wicomico County Public Schools has also greatly reduced the technology gap, distributing available laptops and purchasing more than 8,000 new ones.

Yellow Model: Hybrid of In-School Instruction & At-Home Learning. This model is receiving our greatest focus because it is entirely new and because at this time it seems the most likely scenario. Students would be in school buildings some days while participating in distance learning on other days, to limit capacity and to meet CDC and state health guidelines for physical distancing. Procedures for cleaning and disinfecting classrooms and other school spaces and for screening students and staff prior to entering a school each day would be in place. Nothing has been decided, but our current discussion revolves around a student being in school for instruction 2-3 days a week OR most days every other week, while doing distance learning on the days not at school. No more than half of a class would be in the classroom on any given day.

For students who would be attending school in the Yellow Model, and who live in a transportable area, we will also need parents to tell us whether the student would take the bus. Accurate bus transportation numbers are needed to ensure that plans can be made to transport students with recommended physical distancing.

We understand that families may be unsure about their student returning to a school building. Therefore, we are collaborating with other school systems on the Eastern Shore to develop and implement virtual school programming for students in Kindergarten through Grade 12. We are excited about the possibility of offering this fully online virtual program for families wishing to commit to this option for at least the first semester. Please note that in a hybrid model, Wicomico County Public Schools would not be providing the online learning modules and non-digital learning packets that were available in the spring; students not attending school would be participating in a separate MSDE-approved virtual program. We will need to know, through the registration form, if the virtual program option is the one you would choose for your child.

Green Model: Traditional Learning. While all of us would like to see classroom and school routines return to what we enjoyed before COVID-19, it seems unlikely that will happen in time for the start of the new school year. We will be ready to resume full in-person instruction when Maryland enters Stage 3 and allows for it, but that decision is not within our control.

Thank you for taking the time to respond promptly to the New School Year Registration, responding separately for each student in your household. My thanks to our school-based staff members for taking the Back-to-School Survey.
I will continue to update you throughout the summer, as will your school, which may have more detailed questions as its administrative team prepares master schedules and procedures for the new school year. Thank you.