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For Immediate Release

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SUSD Governing Board to Look to State Public Health Benchmarks to Guide School Reopening Decisions

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. (Aug. 19, 2020) – At its Regular monthly meeting yesterday, the Scottsdale Unified School District (SUSD) Governing Board endorsed using metrics established by the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) to help determine when it is safe to open schools to in-person learning for the 2020-2021 school year.

To aid in that decision-making, the Board also instructed the District to consult a [data dashboard](#) developed by the Maricopa County Department of Public Health (MCDPH) that provides the most recent statistics available on the coronavirus' grip on the county, including SUSD communities. The dashboard, updated weekly on Thursdays, presents the number of cases, percent of positive tests and hospital reports of COVID-19-like illnesses per 100,000 residents. The dashboard provides the data by city, school district and zip code. SUSD schools lie within three municipalities and 10 zip codes, but also draw students from beyond those boundaries.

The state and county public health agencies recently issued benchmark thresholds to define what they consider to be *minimal*, *moderate* and *substantial* spread of the virus in the community, as well as criteria school districts should consider in determining when it may be safe to open schools for in-person learning for the first time since March 2020. That is when the coronavirus pandemic first necessitated limiting large gatherings of people, such as students, teachers and staff at schools, leading to the closure of on-campus learning and the cancellation of extracurricular activities. All SUSD students began the new school year online Aug. 10 in one of two distance-learning options.

Governor Doug Ducey and the Arizona Department of Education have left decisions about returning to in-person learning to local school districts. SUSD Superintendent Dr. Scott Menzel says the wisest course to ensure the continued health, safety and well-being of the District's 23,000 students, 1,500 teachers and school support staff is to follow the recommendations of public health experts.

“We know that in-person learning is the best way to educate children. Both students and teachers thrive best in that environment. While all of us want to get back to school in the

‘traditional’ way, from what we have learned and continue to learn about how this virus spreads, we must be smart and deliberate about how we achieve that,” says Menzel.

“We know that online learning can be difficult for some of our youngest students. That is why we are looking at the option of bringing them back first, with as much adherence as possible to mask wearing, handwashing and physical distancing recommendations. Additionally, online learning can be particularly challenging for students with special needs. The district has a committee working on what a hybrid/phased-in return to learning will look like, once the metrics warrant transitioning from red to yellow on the ADHS dashboard.”

[ADHS](#) recommends that all three of the following benchmarks fall within the *moderate* or *minimal* spread category for two consecutive weeks in order to begin offering hybrid learning, defined as some students in physical buildings and some students distance learning:

- **Cases:** New case rates **below 100** per 100,000 people *or* a two-week decline in case rates
- **PCR Test positivity rate:** **Less than 7%** positivity
- **COVID-like illness of hospital visits:** **Below 10%**

Last week, the MCDPH dashboard showed a Moderate Risk Level of coronavirus infection within SUSD, with 59 cases per 100,000 residents, a 6.35% level of positive COVID-19 tests and 4% of hospital and emergency room (ER) cases reporting COVID-like illnesses. Those numbers were down from 90.34 cases per 100,000 residents, 8.28% positive cases and 7% COVID-like cases the previous week. Hospital/ER case percentages are countywide figures, whereas the case number counts and test positivity rates are community-specific. The next database update will take place tomorrow, Aug. 20.

Based on each school district’s and zip code metrics, the county dashboard also suggests a type of learning scenario that can safely be implemented – traditional, hybrid or virtual with on-site support. Because students attending SUSD come from zip codes beyond the 10 noted above, the District will follow the option provided by MCDPH, which notes, “A school that draws students from an area broader than district boundaries could use a set of regional zip codes to define their region and average the case rates per 100,000 population and test percent positivity.” SUSD will use the 15 zip codes that represent 92% of the District’s enrollment in its considerations. This data will be compiled weekly, after MCDPH updates its dashboard, and will be shared with the SUSD community through direct parent communication, as well as on the District’s website, susd.org.

“We’re moving in the right direction,” says Menzel, “but we’re not there yet. When we do reach that point, we will need two weeks to get the word out to parents and implement learning transition plans. To help us get there, I encourage everyone in our community to continue to follow public health recommendations to help stop the spread of COVID-19: wear a facemask in public when social distancing is not possible, keep a 6-foot distance from others when you’re out and wash your hands frequently.”

“In the meantime, we will continue to work on hybrid learning and extended Enhanced Distance Learning models in order to accommodate not only those who wish their students to be back in a school building as soon as possible, but also those who may have lingering

concerns about their students returning to campuses and those who may need to return to distance learning, at some point, because of illness.”

“We will continue with our mitigation plans to make schools as safe as possible for the return of students and teachers. We will monitor the virus data of the zip codes in which 92% of our students reside. And we will be closely monitoring the experience of other school districts, both locally and nationwide, as they reopen. The last thing we want to do is to go back to school, only to have to shut down again three weeks later,” adds Menzel.

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About the Scottsdale Unified School District

Located northeast of metropolitan Phoenix, the District serves the educational needs of students and families of 23,000 students across 29 campuses. Approximately 240,476 people reside within its boundaries. The District’s award-winning academic, arts and athletic programs draw students from Phoenix, Paradise Valley, Fountain Hills, Tempe and Scottsdale. A highly experienced, professionally certified teaching staff fosters a diverse and rigorous educational environment to develop the potential in every individual learner. Offering gifted learning, special education, career and technical education, and a variety of athletics, arts and enrichment programs and clubs, SUSD provides the rich environment today’s students need to explore their interests, develop important social skills and grow into tomorrow’s leaders. For more information, visit www.susd.org and follow along on social media: [Facebook](#): @ScottsdaleUSD, [Twitter](#): @ScottsdaleUSD, [Instagram](#): @ScottsdaleUnifiedSD, [Nextdoor](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [YouTube](#).