

A note to educators from a large title one Middle School Principal in Florida....
This is how they did it, this is her perspective.....

A note to educators from my sister, Nicole Telese, who is the Principal of a title one large public middle school in Florida:

As we planned for the start of the school year, we were all anxious and overwhelmed by the thought of returning to school full time while operating in a manner that would keep students and staff safe. Since parents were offered choice, we were expecting about a 50/50 split of traditional (face-to-face) and virtual. We had to restructure our master schedule to accommodate both models full time (five days a week) simultaneously, which seemed impossible, but wasn't.

Ultimately we were able to strategically build in virtual rotations on every team, so that each team consisted of two virtual rotations of students and four traditional rotations of students. In an attempt to keep traditional class sizes low, we raised the capacity in virtual classes and drove down the numbers in our traditional classes. This allowed us to plan for social distancing within the traditional classrooms. It also allowed for flexibility for future occurrences in which a student might need to return from virtual school (or vice-versa), they could still be a part of the same team of teachers. We wanted to make sure that we had as much consistency for these students who were always dealing with so much uncertainty in their lives.

We began by revamping our procedures for EVERYTHING. We littered our campus with signage regarding safety expectations (e.g. masks, distancing, hand washing, etc). We built one-way traffic patterns around the entire campus so that as students transitioned, they wouldn't be exposed to oncoming traffic. We found a space for an isolation room where students would be sent if they exhibited any signs related to COVID-19. We planned for and instituted wellness checks at the start of each period. We built in an additional lunch period to drive down numbers in the café, and created strict seating charts (where all students faced one direction and had space in between assigned seats. The list goes on, and many teachers and staff members voiced concern that our middle school students would never follow the newly required safety guidelines. Much to their surprise, after our first week of school, with non-stop drilling of expectations and consistency across campus, students had absolutely no issues following the guidelines. We did institute a hard line consequence that if any student refused to follow the mask protocols, they would immediately be sent out to virtual school. Side note – it is nearly February and we have only had to send 2 students home for virtual instruction (out of 800) for non-compliance with the mask mandate.

At the end of the first quarter, we opened up a window for parents to request that their virtual students return to campus. At which point, we had roughly 100 students return for face-to-face instruction. At the end of December, we invited another 90+ students to return as we noted that they were not progressing sufficiently in the virtual learning environment and another 60 requested to return on their own. We revised our master schedule and are now at about 75% capacity in our traditional classrooms, leaving only one virtual rotation on each team.

We have analyzed our assessment data consistently throughout the course of the year, and there is no arguing that our virtual students are underperforming our traditional students across the board. Even more importantly, when we did our student climate surveys, we found our virtual students to be

reporting higher levels of anxiety, hopelessness, and a feeling of being less connected to adults on campus.

In an attempt to provide additional emotional support, we have ramped up our Social Emotional Learning initiative to incorporate community circles every day in their classes. Our content area teachers each facilitate circles on their assigned day of the week and facilitate lessons on coping skills, etc. We have found that our students readily share their concerns and in turn feel safe and supported by both their teachers and peers.

I am not ashamed to say that I was very skeptical at the start, but can say with utmost assurance that we are doing what is best for children by providing them the opportunity to learn in a safe and caring environment where they can continue to thrive both academically and emotionally.

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **TELESE, NICOLE** <NICOLE.TELESE@stlucieschools.org>

Date: Tue, Jan 26, 2021 at 3:07 PM

Subject: Thoughts on opening schools

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"Our mission is to inspire and empower compassionate, global learners who are committed to creating a better and more peaceful world."



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