

**LT moves to formal instruction**Brooke Williams / Published: April 22, 2020

The Lackawanna Trail School District plans to transition from optional enrichment and review activities to required formal instruction, with April 27 as the targeted rollout date.

Superintendent Matthew Rakauskas said the district originally planned to stick with enrichment and review as schools remain closed for the rest of this academic year, but possibly make improvements in structure and student participation.

Anticipating that directives from the Pennsylvania Department of Education would change, he said Lackawanna Trail has decided to “make that jump” to direct instruction.

On or before April 27, Rakauskas said the district hopes to explain its updated continuity of education plan to students and their parents.

From now until then, the administration plans to explore options of what mandatory instruction outside of the brick and mortar schools might look like, with the goal of creating a program that’s not too much for families to handle during an already difficult time.

In a survey conducted earlier this month, the district found that more than 10 percent of Lackawanna Trail students don’t have access to an electronic device to do online schoolwork, which he estimates is over 100 students.

Rakauskas applied for a Continuity of Education Equity Grant through PDE in hopes of purchasing 50 Chromebooks to meet some of these students’ needs.

If awarded, he said the district could potentially loan Chromebooks out for two weeks at a time to give access to everyone in need. If the grant doesn’t pan out, investing in more technology may be an option for the district.

Either way, he said Lackawanna Trail hasn’t abandoned the traditional paper and pencil option and wants to reach all students, even if it means delivering work packets to them.

“We’re going to do everything in our power to reach every family,” he said. “We’re not going to create a plan that is over the top or burdensome.”

Lackawanna Trail was seven days away from the end of its third marking period when schools originally closed.

Between now and April 27, teachers will work on reconciling and finalizing third quarter grades. For instance, if a student has an outstanding assignment, their teacher will reach out to them before finalizing their grade.

How upcoming graded assignments will get factored in is to be determined along with the rest of Lackawanna Trail’s new plan, Rakauskas said.

During a Lackawanna Trail School Board meeting held digitally via Zoom on April 14, the administration offered additional updates on academics and end-of-year plans.

The last student day for Lackawanna Trail is June 1 as the school calendar hasn’t changed, but Rakauskas said plans for graduation remain to be seen.

It’s unlikely that the district could hold a traditional ceremony on June 5 as planned, but Principal Mark Murphy assured that seniors could still expect some type of recognition.

“My thoughts go out to the class of 2020. I know they’re a resilient group, but this is certainly more than we’ve asked of any senior class that has come before them,” Murphy said.

The first option is to hold graduation at Lions Pride Stadium following guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control. Murphy has also been investigating the possibility of a drive-in ceremony as a second option.

“If we’re not allowed to gather in any way, shape or form, we will of course be holding a virtual ceremony as a last resort,” he said. “In the coming weeks, we’ll get in touch with the senior class and have them vote and discuss some of the options.”

Lackawanna Trail has also launched a senior spotlight series on its website.

Murphy said there are no plans to reschedule the prom or hold a separate class night, though he expects opportunities to combine certain class night elements into the graduation ceremony.

On the elementary side, Principal Brian Kearney said teachers have set up online Google Classrooms for subjects like art, music and physical education.

Kearney has also been brainstorming alternatives for the sixth grade recognition with his staff.

Special Education Director Amie Talarico said her department is exploring instituting telehealth services for speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy and counseling as an addition to the continuity of education plan.

Also, the board voted on a proposed 2020-21 final budget totaling $21,494,409.37. David Thorne, board president, said it’s a “zero growth budget” with no proposed increase in property taxes.

“We understand the tough times that we are currently in. We’re making cutbacks in other areas, such as putting off things like the field house and other areas, and focusing as much as we can on the academics, coming up to speed on where we need to be with technology,” he said.

Keith Glynn, business manager, clarified that while the district won’t take in more property tax revenue than last year, millage rates will change since the district covers more than one county.

“The formula for taxes takes into account the State Tax Equalization Board’s market value totals for each county’s properties and tries to rebalance the portion each county pays based on the percent of its market value to the total district market value,” he explained.

Market value in Lackawanna County went up almost a full percentage point in its portion of the total district market value, meaning the county must pay approximately one percent more of the tax assessment, he said.

Lackawanna County’s total assessed value also went down, resulting in each property paying more to make up that percentage of the tax base.

“These two components are what is driving a tax increase in Lackawanna County while Wyoming County receives a tax decrease,” Glynn said.

Under this budget, Wyoming County would experience a 2.43 percent decrease (91.68 mills) while Lackawanna County could expect a 2.15 percent increase (170.88 mills).

Lackawanna Trail plans to continue providing free meal packages to students every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. in the high school parking lot until June 1.

The district currently uses the Seamless Summer Option, which PDE extended to allow schools to serve meals throughout the closure, but Glynn said they haven’t decided whether to reapply to extend the program beyond June 1 yet.

The monthly Children’s Produce Market has also resumed, with a recent pickup at the high school on April 16.

The board also approved the following on April 14:

\*Allow the business office to pay any necessary bills from April 15 to June 30.

\*The Act 93 administration contract for July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2024.

\*Acknowledge the resignation of Community Bank as the paying agent on all bond issues as of May 15.

\*A contract with Fidelity Bank as the paying agent for all bond issues as of May 15.

\*Brittany Butler’s FMLA leave request for the beginning of the 2020-21 school year to Dec. 15.

\*Appoint John G. Audi of Sweet, Stevens, Katz & Williams as the school solicitor, effective July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021.

\*First readings of Policy 006.1: Attendance at Meetings Via Electronic Communication, Policy 335: Family and Medical Leave, and Policy 626: Federal Fiscal Compliance; and second readings of several policies from the Pennsylvania Schools Boards Association Policy Manual.

\*Acknowledge the retirement of social studies teacher Curt Sohns, effective at the end of the 2019-20 school year.

\*Acknowledge the resignation of Kelly Hopkins as adviser to the Interact Club, effective at the end of the 2019-20 school year.

The Lackawanna Trail School Board has canceled its work session on May 4, but plans to meet again on May 11 via Zoom at 7:30 p.m. Access information will become available on ltsd.org prior to the meeting.