

**Trail schools hoping for traditional start**Brooke Williams / Published: May 13, 2020

A delayed, but traditional start to the 2020-2021 school year is Plan A for the Lackawanna Trail School District.

While its administration and school board continue hoping for the best, they know the uncertainty of this global pandemic warrants a backup plan.

“Our hope is that we put together a plan that we never have to use,” said Superintendent Matthew Rakauskas.

During a virtual Lackawanna Trail School Board meeting on Monday, Rakauskas presented the district’s 2020-2021 academic calendar, which board members later approved.

Contingent upon Pennsylvania’s reopening status this fall, faculty will return for two in-service days on Sept. 8 and 9. The school year for students will run from Sept. 10 to June 9.

Lackawanna Trail typically resumes in late August, but Rakauskas recommended a later start because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I’m trying to give some cushion to make sure we have enough time to get our students and our employees into the building safely,” he said.

Plan B includes an earlier start, but online. This option, if necessary, would run from Aug. 24 to May 26. Students would return to the brick and mortar schools when the state deems it safe.

This option would upgrade the current continuity of education plan in place to include more rigid, synchronous learning under a traditional grading system. Rakauskas assured that the district will plan for students with no access to a device and/or internet connection.

“There’s a lot of work to do, a lot of budgeting to do and a lot of planning to do, and we’ll be ready for that,” he said.

Rakauskas mentioned the possibility of a “blended start” as a third option, but he doesn’t believe it’s a viable option at this point.

The calendar also plans the Monday after Thanksgiving, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and Holy Thursday as regular school days. June 10 to 30 have been slated for makeup days.

Graduation date options include June 11, June 18, or sometime between June 21 and 30.

Rakauskas said the public could view the approved calendar online at ltsd.org.

Afterward, Principal Mark Murphy provided an overview about end-of-year events for the senior class.

“We understand their disappointment right now,” Murphy said. “We know that these are once in a lifetime events and our hearts go out to them, but we’re committed to making them as memorable as we possibly can.”

There are too many barriers to hold a prom, and an announcement of the official cancellation is forthcoming. However, Murphy said there have been discussions about doing something special for the Class of 2020 during this fall’s Homecoming Weekend.

June 12 has been targeted for a virtual class night ceremony at 5 p.m. via Zoom, immediately followed by a community parade beginning at the high school. Graduation has been postponed to June 30 with July 17 as a backup.

“The seniors overwhelmingly voiced that they want to have a graduation ceremony at their school despite whatever barriers there may be,” he said.

The hope is to have an in-person ceremony, but if that isn’t possible by July, Murphy said they have agreed on a virtual ceremony followed by an in-person diploma distribution that would follow social distancing guidelines.

In other business, the board approved phase II of Lackawanna Trail’s continuity of education plan for the remainder of this school year, which has been in place since late April.

Board members also approved updated course description guides for both schools, with the main change being language that ensures courses could be transitioned to virtual instruction.

RBC Capital Markets will serve as the investment banker for the 2020 Lackawanna Trail general obligation bond/refinancing issue, the board decided.

Keith Glynn, business manager, explained that the district has an option every five years to look at a portion of its bonds and call it, refinance it or add debt.

“The board met through the finance committee with our investment banker from previous bond issues, who advised us that there’s substantial savings out in the market due to increased interest rates from the time we issued the original debt,” he said.

There may be an option in place to take the same 15-year term that’s remaining, but refund it at a lower interest rate, Glynn said. The board is targeting around $200,000 in savings over the life of the debt.

“There’s no obligation at this point to actually do the debt refinancing,” he said.

The board also approved the following on Monday:

\*A contract with Nutrition Group for the 2020-21 school year.

\*A contract with Pivot Physical Therapy for physical therapy ($100 per hour), occupational therapy ($100 per hour) and speech pathology services ($90 per hour, extended school year only) for the 2020-21 school year.

\*Revised bus/van transportation contracts for the 2019-20 school year.

\*Tuition waivers for 16 eligible non-resident students for the 2020-21 school year.

\*Appointment of Kelly Services for substitute teacher and support staff calling services for the 2020-21 school year.

\*Advertising rates for the 2020-21 school year: 3’ x 4’, $250; 4’ x 6’, $300; and annual renewal $75.

\*Sarah DeBree as a bookkeeper/confidential secretary from July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021 at an initial rate of $21.10 per hour.

\*Tara Crum as a confidential administrative assistant from July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021 at an initial rate of $21.10 per hour.

\*Second readings of Policies 006.1: Attendance at Meeting via Electronic Communication, Policy 335: Family and Medical Leave, and Policy 626: Federal Fiscal Compliance.

\*Adoption of 200-level Pennsylvania School Boards Association policies.

\*Joel Nietz as a volunteer girls basketball coach and Ben Domiano as a volunteer boys basketball coach, both for the 2020-21 school year.

The board’s June 1 work session and June 29 regular meeting will be conducted via Zoom, with access information available on ltsd.org.