



Tulare County extends in-person education to grades 3-6



By Reggie Ellis
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Eight private schools with approved waivers can open their campus to every student from TK to sixth grade

TULARE COUNTY – Eight private schools in Tulare County were allowed to reopen campuses for grades TK to 6 last week after the county reached a State benchmark for new cases.

On Sept. 16, Tulare County Public Health announced that schools who had waivers approved by the county and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) were allowed to extend in-person learning to grades 3 to 6. The eight schools had been allowed to offer in-person instruction for transitional kindergarten through second grade beginning on Sept. 14. Part of the reason for the shift was Tulare County’s improving trend in meeting state metrics in the Governor’s new Blueprint for a Safer Economy.

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Tulare County dropped below the 14 per 100,000 case rate on Sept. 10 (13.8) for the first time since June 10 (13.2) and has been able to remain below 12 since Sept. 13. The downward trend allowed Tulare County Public Health to extend in-person instruction to grades 3 to 6 at schools who already had an approved waiver.

As of press time, schools with waivers approved by county and state health officials included Central Valley Christian School in Visalia, Dinuba Junior Academy in Dinuba, George McCann Elementary in Visalia, Sierra View Junior Academy in Exeter, St. Paul’s Elementary in Visalia, Zion Lutheran School in Terra Bella, St. Anne’s School in Porterville and St. Aloysius Catholic School in Tulare.

It was a fairly normal scene at St. Aloysius Catholic School in Tulare on Monday, beginning the second full week of in-person instruction at the school. Despite masks over the faces and standing in line and sitting at desks six feet apart, students filed into campus in an orderly manner taking their seats in class and getting instruction from a teacher, who obviously was also wearing a mask.

“Parents are ecstatic to have their students back on campus and teachers are excited to be back as well,” principal Holly Zamora said. “It was hard for our parents struggling to juggle work and being a teacher. Many of them had to pay for

day care in addition to paying tuition, so there was added stress financially as well.”

The school’s gate opens at 7:45 a.m. every day where students wait to have their temperature taken and answer a few questions before being admitted to campus. Parents, who also agreed to have their temperature taken and wear masks, were allowed to walk their young students to their classroom where students had to go directly to their seat in their classroom and sit down.



“Most students actually prefer to keep their masks on, so there hasn’t been a lot of complaints from students about that,” Zamora said. “Our students have done exceptionally well keeping their masks on.”

At 8:05 a.m., teachers begin allowing students to put away their backpacks and get out their textbooks one by one. Bathroom breaks are limited to one student for each sink and hall passes are left hanging on the outside to let other students and staff know how many spaces were left in each restroom. One grade level is released for recess at a time, and classes rotate between the black top area or the grass field area, or staying inside for recess for a different day in the rotation. For the most part, Zamora said students are attending school on the same schedule as before the stay-in-place order. St. Aloysius students attend school from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday and are released early at 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday.

“I think it is a relief for our younger students who are learning to read to be in person,” Zamora said. “It was very stressful for the teachers and the students. It’s also hard to know if students understand what’s going on during a Zoom meeting or if they are just saying they understand.”

Zamora said the main difference between pre-pandemic times to today is the school has decided not to reopen “hot lunches” in the cafeteria until the county’s overall case rate improves. Students are required to wear their masks at all times, except during snack and lunch breaks and during designated or requested mask breaks.

“Students are allowed to ask for a mask break while they are sitting at their seat,” Zamora said. “Even I need a mask break during the day.”

The same can also be said of St. Anne’s in Porterville and George McCann in Visalia. Both operate under the rules of the Office of Catholic Education for the Catholic Diocese in Fresno.

St. Paul’s in Visalia will be welcoming back students in grades 3-6 tomorrow, Sept. 24. Head of School Seth Yocum said only about 10-15 students decided to remain in distance learning when the private school reopened its campus to TK-2 grade in the first phase of the waiver on Sept. 14. Yocum says the district requires parents to download the HealthTrac app, which touts itself as the “first ever contactless, video-based, full service, general health and wellness monitoring App.” Parents must log their students’ temperature and then answer a series of health screening questions before leaving home. Once they arrive at school, parents show the health screening on their phone to a school employee manning one of two entry gates before dropping off their child. Drop off begins at 7:30 a.m. and class begins at 8:15 a.m.

Children must be wearing a mask prior to exiting the car and are required to go straight to their classroom. The school is continuing to offer art and music education in the students’ classroom but no singing is allowed. Instead of trips to the library for story time, Yocum said the school librarian reads aloud to the students through the computer. Recess is rotated between classrooms and students have been able to maintain their regular schedule with TK and kindergarten being released at 2 p.m. and first and second grade being released at 3 p.m.

A host of other private, rural and charter schools have school waivers under review by Tulare County Public Health. As of Monday, the following schools’ waivers were pending with the county: Hope Elementary in Porterville, Grace Christian School in Visalia, Outside Creek in Farmersville, Valley Life Charter School in Terra Bella, Saucelito Elementary in Terra Bella and Stone Corral in Seville. For more information on the school waivers and reopening Tulare County schools, visit <https://covid19.tularecounty.ca.gov/school-resources>.

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