

**RESEARCH TRIANGLE CHARTER ACADEMY**  
**SAFE RETURN TO SCHOOL & CONTINUITY OF LEARNING PLAN**

*Updated: September 2023*

**Overview:** Consistent with our charter, we believe that the best learning environment for our students includes regular, day-to-day, in-school instruction provided by a teacher. Our goal is to have a traditional, in-school learning environment for our students if this can be accomplished while keeping students and staff safe and healthy. As we pursue this goal, we continually seek guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) on best practices in mitigating the spread of COVID-19. This document summarizes our school's safe return to school plan for the 2023-24 school year. As the CDC, state, and local health department guidelines change and are released, the school will update its plan and practice. These updates will occur every six months, and more frequently as needed.

If necessary, the school is prepared to transition to hybrid or remote learning environments. We are committed to providing all students with a high-quality education regardless of the learning environment(s) we use throughout the year. In anticipation of possible interruptions to in-person instruction, our management partner, National Heritage Academies (NHA), has provided a Chromebook or laptop device to each student. This investment in technology was made to ensure a seamless transition between models when necessary.

**Background:** The past three years have given schools historic challenges. In response to these challenges, we have innovated, shaping new ideas to ensure students continue to receive a high-quality education. Many of our innovations and tools can continue to have value long after the current problems ease.

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, we knew that changes in our learning model would be required to keep students and staff safe and healthy. We began the school year prepared to operate in various modes as necessary throughout the year. Detailed plans were created around each learning scenario, which included:

- *In-person learning:* a return to a traditional classroom environment.
- *Remote learning:* teaching and learning done completely at home.
- *Hybrid learning:* a combination of in-person and remote instruction.

Throughout the 2021-2022 school year, we continually updated our practices and procedures to address the changing needs and challenges we have faced because of the pandemic. We have learned that secondary transmissions are rare in school settings and which mitigations strategies work best in our school to help reduce the transmission of COVID-19. Data has shown that our in-person learners learn more and have a much greater likelihood of testing proficient. We have worked to be innovative to add in additional opportunities to make the time we have with our students more effective and to consider how we increase learning time with our students to address students' learning loss.

As we embark on the 2023-2024 school year, we will continue to prioritize in-person learning while remaining prepared to adjust course if the need should arise.

**Personal protective equipment:** Masks are optional for staff, students, and visitors. If state or local governments require something, the school will adjust its policy to comply. The school will follow any CDC, state, or local requirements for using masks and face coverings, should they change. The school will support students and staff who choose to continue wearing a mask.

**Social/physical distancing:** When feasible, desks are spaced three to six feet apart whenever possible. Plexiglass barriers are utilized in the main office to assist with social distancing efforts. Social distancing reminder signs are placed throughout the building to remind students and staff to practice safe spacing. The school uses staggered arrival and departure times to allow for social distancing. Students transition between classrooms at staggered times to allow for social distancing at lockers.

**Hygiene and cleaning:** All high touch point locations (i.e., light switches, door handles, bathroom faucet handles, etc.) are disinfected and cleaned once per day as part of normal janitorial operations. All cleaning materials are EPA-approved for use against COVID-19 and are stored safely and in compliance with standards. NHA continues to follow current guidance from the CDC.

In addition to the added efforts of our provider of janitorial services, we are all joining in the effort to promote safe hygiene habits. Hand sanitizing stations are available throughout the building. Each classroom has materials to disinfect commonly shared items such as computers and curricular tools. Handwashing posters instructing and reinforcing proper handwashing techniques are placed in bathrooms.

**Monitoring student and staff health:** NHA monitors and follow any federal, state, and local requirements as it relates to COVID-19 safety procedures and follows them as necessary to ensure the safety of our students and staff and to ensure the continuity of in-person learning. Currently, there are no quarantine requirements, only recommendations, but the school will continue to monitor federal or state requirements and recommendations for changes. In general, students/staff with COVID-19 should remain home until symptoms are better and/or they are fever free for 24 hours. We also encourage all students and staff to consult and follow-up with their primary care physician.

**Vaccinations:** NHA has provided us up-to-date information and resources on vaccination in our state and county.

**Continuity of Learning for Special Populations:** Students with IEPs or 504s access the same learning opportunities offered to general education students. These learning activities and supports address student needs identified in their IEP/504 to the extent appropriate. To accomplish this, special education providers collaborate with general education teachers to ensure provision of accommodations and modifications (when appropriate) that allow students to access learning opportunities. Individualized accommodations are documented and shared with classroom teachers for each student. English Learning (EL) teachers work with classroom teachers to provide necessary scaffolds to schoolwork to ensure that EL students have access to the core content.

The school complies with the regulations imposed by the state and by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that all children with disabilities receive an Individual Educational Program (IEP) designed to address their unique needs. All required components of the IEP are addressed, including a description of the student's present level of academic achievement and functional performance, including disability-related needs, goals and objectives, supplemental aides and services, program services, ancillary services, and extended school year.

All students with disabilities are considered general education students first. Each IEP is designed to assure that eligible students receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and specialized instruction delivered by highly qualified special education staff within the least restrictive environment (LRE). Before school opens, we review registration forms to identify students with current IEPs from previous schools attended. We inform parents of their rights, procedures, and responsibilities under special education law. Decisions about an IEP are made by the school's IEP Team. This team has required participants, including general and special education providers and administrators. Parents are also encouraged to join the IEP Team.

As much as appropriate, children who are disabled are educated with children who are nondisabled. Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that satisfactory education in regular classes with supplemental aids and services cannot be achieved.

To meet LRE requirements, the school ensures that a continuum of placement options is available to students with disabilities, including:

- services provided within the general education classroom;
- pull-out services;
- special classes;
- home instruction;
- instruction in hospitals and institutions; and
- in special circumstances, access to programs and services in settings outside the school.

The Individualized Education Program Team (IEPT) makes decisions about student placement.

**Continuity of food services:** We meet all guidance and procedures set forth by the CDC and by state and local health departments related to food service models and operations for students. We provide staff additional PPE, including gloves, masks, cleaning chemicals, and hand sanitizer. Sneeze guards have been added to all food distribution carts. Staff are trained on food safety standards on a regular basis and abide by all safety regulations.

In the event of a COVID-19 outbreak, we work with school nutrition agencies and local health departments to ensure that we comply with all requirements. We continue serving food when schools are closed when that is allowed and can be done safely. We continue to provide meal service to the extent applicable. We notify parents when food is available via the SchoolMessenger system (which can send emails and texts to each family), school newsletters

and updates, and our website as appropriate.

**Mental health, behavioral, and emotional support services and support:** Traumatic experiences like COVID-19 can impact learning, behavior, and relationships at school. Research clearly indicates that a traumatic experience in childhood can diminish concentration, memory, and the development of language that children need to be successful at school. The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting not just our children's physical health and academic experience, but it is taking a deep emotional toll as well. We believe children's well-being comes first, and that young people like adults, learn best when they are happy, safe, calm, and cared for properly.

As educators, we need to do everything in our arsenal to reduce the effects of trauma so that students can learn at an optimal level. Trauma does not discriminate between urban and suburban students as people will perceive threats like COVID-19 in their own way.

NHA has provided professional development on Emotional Intelligence, Leading in Complex Times, and Behave with Care, as well as Empathic Leadership. Each of these sessions focused on developing our leaders' social and emotional competence to ensure healthy and effective ways of thinking, relating, and problem-solving.

Building leaders are provided with a menu of effective curricular tool and resource options that will help address the social and emotional well-being of students and staff in our schools. These options are evidence-based programs that are in alignment with the CASEL Framework and can be used to meet the needs of their school community.

The organization also prioritizes the mental and social-emotional health of staff. Leaders hold one-on-one meetings with employees that help leaders assess employees' physical and mental health. We also have an ethics hotline employees can use to report concerns. Additionally, we give employees free access to an employee assistance program, through which they can access a library of resources for self-care as well as free counseling sessions.