




MEMORANDUM

TO: School District Superintendents

FROM: Dr. Michael Johnson, Commissioner 

DATE: October 5, 2020

SUBJECT: 2020-2021 School Year Minimal Instructional Hours Requirement

The purpose of this memorandum is to clarify expectations regarding district Smart Start 2020 plans and formal calendar waivers.

Smart Start 2020 Plans

DEED is requesting each district use the Alaska Smart Start 2020 framework to build a comprehensive plan for teaching and learning in the upcoming school year and submit the plan to the department. Once received, a team of DEED staff review each plan within 24 hours to confirm if all the common plan elements, as identified by education stakeholders, are addressed in the plan. At the same time, a team of DHSS medical staff review each plan and provide health and safety feedback for consideration. DEED then posts each district's plan online for the public to view.

DEED has consistently communicated that we are not approving district Smart Start 2020 plans. DEED has no authority in State law to require and/or approve districts to complete a restart plan for the 2020-2021 school year. DEED does, however, have the authority to approve calendar waivers.

Calendar Waivers

As Commissioner, I have repeatedly communicated that I will be flexible in providing calendar waivers for the start of the 2020-2021 school year, so long as the district has clearly articulated a plan for supporting teachers and students in teaching and learning. Calendar waivers approved to date have allowed districts to delay their start date to provide additional professional development days to train teachers.

I appreciate the creativity and hard work that districts have demonstrated in rearranging school days to follow the Alaska Smart Start 2020 health and safety guidance in light of COVID-19. At this time, I have not approved requests to waive the required minimal instructional hours as outlined in State law. **On behalf of Alaska's students and families, it is my expectation that districts ensure the required minimal instructional hours are being met over the course of the school year.** As the school year progresses, I will continue to reevaluate this expectation and discuss district's unique needs on an individual basis.

The district's Smart Start 2020 plan will serve as justification and documentation for any waivers that are granted. Waiver requests will need to include an explanation of how the waiver will allow the district to provide the instructional services required in State law in a safe manner.

AS 14.03.030 defines the school term, including minimal instructional hours and allowable waivers. Districts are required to provide a minimum of 740 hours of instruction for K-3 and 900 hours of instruction for grades 4-12, an approximate equivalent to a 180-day school term.

AS 14.03.040 provides that a day in session in every school shall be at least four hours long, exclusive of intermissions, for the first, second, and third grades and five hours, exclusive of intermissions, for all other grades, although the Commissioner may approve a shorter day in session for any grade. AS 14.03.040 also provides that "the period of the day in session shall be devoted to the instruction of pupils or to study periods for the pupils." Statutory language is intentionally broad to give local school boards the flexibility to deliver an educational program for each student in a manner that reflects each district's situation.

Example:

The district's days are broken up into 3 hour blocks of direct instructional time with two cohorts, because the physical space of the buildings does not allow for bigger groups. The district's school week is 4 days. The expectation is that students are independently working outside of those direct instructional hours during the day. Fridays are days where tutorials are scheduled with students, as needed, as well as labs, field trips, and other support per individual need. This is part of the district's phased approach for at least the first 9 weeks of school, with the desire to re-establish a more "normal" schedule as circumstances unfold.

Based on the schedule described above, students are receiving three hours of direct instructional time, in addition to independent study periods in the same day - if this totals "four hours long, exclusive of intermissions, for the first, second, and third grades and five hours, exclusive of intermissions, for all other grades" then the minimal instructional hours are being met. With respect to the four day school week, the district needs to calculate the total instructional hours to ensure a "minimum of 740 hours of instruction for K-3 and 900 hours of instruction for grades 4-12" is being provided over the course of the year. Knowing this is a temporary arrangement for a minimum of 9 weeks, DEED anticipates the district will be able to meet the minimal instructional hours over the course of the year.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to my office if you need clarification or have specific questions related to your district.