

## Catholic schools will open Aug. 31 with safety protocols in place for 2020-21

Posted By *Christopher Gunty* On July 24, 2020 @ 3:00 pm In [#IamCatholic](#), [Coronavirus](#), [Feature](#), [Local News](#), [News](#), [Schools](#) | [Comments](#)  
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The Department of Catholic Schools released [guidance for the 2020-21 school year](#) July 24 to help Catholic schools in the archdiocese provide safe instruction in a variety of formats.

"The bottom line is the health and safety and well-being of our students, faculty and staff is our first priority," said Chancellor of Education James Sellinger.

The plan is designed to maximize both safety and in-person instruction and requires strict adherence to all recommended safety practices, including social distancing and the wearing of facial coverings.

Teachers will return Aug. 24, with students returning Aug. 31, a week before Labor Day.

According to a news release, "most Catholic schools will be able to safely accommodate all students for five-day, in-person instruction; however, due to the size and staffing of some school facilities, some schools will begin the school year under a blended or hybrid model incorporating both in-person and remote learning."

Students and families will have the option of in-person learning with new safety requirements; hybrid learning, where students learn in-person and remotely; and remote learning.

Superintendent of Catholic Schools Donna Hargens told the Catholic Review that the experience of being in school – with social interaction – makes learning happen.



When Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore reopen for the 2020-21 school year, remote learning will be an option for families that do not want to send their children to school but who want to continue their Catholic education. (Courtesy Archdiocese of Baltimore Catholic Schools)

"Even though our teachers did an amazing job (when schools were closed from mid-March through the end of the 2019-20 school year), we know that face-to-face learning and experiencing learning together is the best way to learn," she said.

Sellingner agreed that children learn more effectively face-to-face than in a virtual environment, a belief he said was echoed by Karen B. Salmon, Maryland State Superintendent of Schools, when she announced July 22 that government-run schools would have flexibility to open for the fall semester.

The Catholic schools' guidance was developed over the last two months by a task force and subcommittees that had representation from principals, health care professionals, counselors, educators, parents and other experts. "It's been a lot of input from a lot of different sources," including focus groups, Sellingner said.

The task force had direct technical support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as guidance from a report from the American Academy of Pediatrics, which noted that from an emotional and social perspective, a face-to-face environment is beneficial.

"If a school is a family, a classroom is a family within the school family, and everybody desires to be connected and belong to that," Hargens said. That's why, she said, the Department of Schools developed plans to provide instruction addressing the academic needs of students, as well as their social and emotional well-being. "And very important, obviously, is Catholic identity and the experience of being in a Catholic school with those values.

"If you could learn everything you needed to learn without that experience, why would you need schools? Clearly, schools are necessary and





Catholic schools will include signage to provide for proper social distancing measures for the 2020-21 school year. (Courtesy Archdiocese of Baltimore Catholic Schools)

teachers are necessary to establish the right environment where learning happens," she said.

To create the proper environment, associate superintendents from the schools office have made on-campus visits throughout the archdiocese, helping each school implement the guidelines and design instruction within the safety guidelines and protocols.

"Furniture is being moved. Things are being moved out of the classrooms. Hallways are designated as one-way. The protocol of how drop off and pickup will happen, how children are going to eat, all of those things are being worked out," Hargens said.

She said it's amazing to watch. "We're still over a month out, but sleeves are rolled up, everybody's working to prepare for the safe return of staff and students."

The guidance applies to elementary and high schools operated by the archdiocese or parishes. Families will receive communication from their school's administration in the coming weeks regarding the specifics on how this plan will be implemented at their location.

encouraged throughout the day. (Courtesy Archdiocese of Baltimore Catholic Schools)

Some students, for health reasons, won't be able to attend school in person, opting instead for synchronous learning. "The task is to make sure that we're designing instruction," Hargens said. "With those soundbar/camera systems, a student with a health issue would be able to join his or her peers and be connected to the classroom and actually see the teacher for a period of time during the day."

Sellinger said his office is assessing how many students expect to be in the classrooms; the guidance expects it will be a majority. "We're going to be surveying our families as to what mode of operation they want to operate in, whether it's face-to-face or virtual or a combination thereof," he said. Those on the hybrid plan will attend school two to four days a week and learn at home one to three days.

The guidance released July 24 includes health and safety protocols, including temperature checks before students or staff can enter the building each day. Personal protective equipment (facemasks) will be required for everyone over the age of 3.

Hand sanitizer will be readily available and frequent handwashing will be encouraged.

Classrooms will be reconfigured and some large gathering spaces may be adapted to help with social distancing. Corridors may be designated as one way or marked clearly for two-way traffic.

Facilities will be cleaned and disinfected on a schedule developed by each school, with teachers and staff frequently cleaning high-touch surfaces such as door handles, sink handles, drinking fountains and stair railings.

A news release accompanying the publication of the report said the guidance will be updated accordingly as guidelines, directives and procedures evolve.

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independent schools have participated in video conference calls during the pandemic, providing an opportunity to collaborate.

Sellinger said other Catholic school systems are opening under similar plans, including in New York, New Jersey and Chicago.

The board of education in Baltimore County, meanwhile, which has the largest public school system in the archdiocese, voted July 21 to delay in-school instruction and continue with remote learning through Jan. 29, the end of its first semester. Public schools in Anne Arundel, Harford and Howard counties have similar plans, although Harford will allow some students access to campus. Baltimore City will continue remote learning through at least its first quarter, which ends in November.

Catholic schools do not have to align with the local education agency (LEA), usually the city or county public school system. Although Catholic schools tend to follow the LEA during inclement weather for efficiency and convenience, that does not apply for reopening the school.

To assist teachers with the hybrid learning model, the archdiocese has purchased and installed more than 1,000 AMX Acendo Vibe camera/sound bar units, to "put a tool into the hands of a teacher" so they can be present to the students in the classroom and at home, Hargens said.





# St. John Regional brings students back full time with precautions

By Katryna Perera [kperera@newspost.com](mailto:kperera@newspost.com)

Sep 25, 2020



Students take part in Julie Pessagno's sixth-grade class Thursday at St. John Regional Catholic School in Frederick.

Staff photo by Graham Cullen

While most schools across the county have opted for either a virtual or hybrid model of education this semester, St. John Regional Catholic School (SJRC) is practically back to normal, operating full hours, five days a week with most children back in classrooms.

The school, located off Opossumtown Pike, is a private Catholic school serving children from pre-K through eighth grade. The school currently has about 480 students enrolled, said principal Annette Marie Jones.

They decided to return students to the building full time this semester because they felt like they could make it work safely, Jones said. Using guidance from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Archdiocese of Baltimore — of which the school is a member — staff worked throughout the summer to survey families and teachers, measure classrooms within the building, clear out extra



Families were given the option of returning to school fulltime or staying virtual, and according to Jones, about 33 percent of families opted for virtual learning.

Edith Azane, a parent of third- and fifth-graders at SJRC decided to stay virtual. For herself and her family, there are still too many unknowns about the virus.

"My mom [lives] with us, and she is high-risk ,and so we try to take all kinds of precautions," Azane said. "There's still no real cure out there, and things haven't really changed from when it all started. If I myself am scared of going out, why would I want to send the kids to school?"

Although virtual learning can be challenging at times, Azane said her children are getting used to it and that the staff of SJRC has been instrumental in making sure distance learning goes smoothly.

For virtual learners, they are in class every day along with everybody else, just from a screen. Each classroom in SJRC has been retrofitted with technology to make sure kids from home can learn synchronously with their in-person classmates.

It takes a little more planning than usual from a teacher's end, said Alex Kuszniir a seventh- and eighth-grade math teacher, but it's nothing that can't be fixed by a few adjustments here and there.

When the school first announced it would be returning full-time, Kuszniir said she was a little nervous because she didn't know how everything would work.

"I immediately thought of students trading masks or running around and bumping into each other. So, I don't think I was totally on board with it until I saw it in action, and I saw the kids are being pretty good about it," she said.

And the kids are being good about it, even the youngest ones, said Michele Kavanagh, who teaches a pre-K class for 4-year-olds. The children in her class are spaced out, two at each table, wear their masks most of the day, and have their own yoga mats, which are used as a play space. They also each have their own bucket of toys and school supplies.

"When we have to get in line, they know to put their hands out so they can stay apart, and we have markers along the floor to help them learn...it's a part of who they are right now, which is a little bit sad, but they don't fuss at it all. It really amazes me," Kavanagh said.

She was also a little nervous at first about coming back to school, but knew she needed to be there for her students. Being in school around their friends and their teachers is critical at this age, Kavanagh said, and sometimes she worries that her virtual learners are missing out.

"I find it very hard for [virtual learners] to be at home because they are not experiencing the small conversations that we're having, the social and emotional part of being together in a class. It's so important at this age," she said.

Not all teachers, like Kavanagh and Kuszniir decided to return though. Jones said there were a few, who for personal or family reasons decided to either retire or resign. Those staff members then had to be replaced, but Jones said it wasn't difficult to recruit new employees.

"It was an interesting time because we found there were so many teachers who wanted to work in-person with students," she said.



The students who decided to attend SJRC in-person were divided into groups based on their grades. Each group was assigned a space or a classroom in the building, and students stay at their assigned desks — each has a sneeze guard around it — all day while teachers for different subjects filter through. Students either bring their own lunch or order online from the cafeteria, and meals are delivered to them individually packaged. They also are allowed mask breaks in the gym or outside, but must maintain social distance.

Each student, or their parent, must complete a daily wellness check in the morning, and each student's temperature is checked upon arrival. If a student or staff member were to present symptoms of COVID-19 while in the building, there is an isolation room, and they would be sent home for further evaluation by a doctor or health professional, said school nurse Lisa Kempfer.

So far, the school has been fortunate in terms of people getting sick.

"Presumptive positive, we've had a few, and the parents have been great about it, and they've gone and gotten evaluated and come back when they needed to come back, but we have not had a positive yet," Kempfer said.

Henry Brown, a fifth-grader, said he was nervous about getting sick, but now he doesn't worry about it so much.

"It's kind of just something I've gotten used to, and sometimes I forget I'm even wearing [a mask]."

Josie Patil, a seventh-grader, said mask wearing is not hard to adhere to, it's remembering all the other restrictions.

"It's easy to wear the mask, but sometimes it's hard because we're not allowed to share supplies or lend someone something, so sometimes that's hard to remember," she said.

The first term for SJRC ends in November, and Jones said that as of now, the school plans to operate in this manner for the remainder of the school year. Families who are virtual, school employees said, may decide to return to in-person as the year goes on.



#SOMETHINGGOOD

## Parents and students surprise St. John Catholic School staff with drive-by parade





for all that they have done this year for students.

Tony Checchia is a parent of two St. Johns students and planned this to celebrate the staff's effort to go above and beyond to keep their students safe while learning.

Checchia said, "Having our kids in person, I don't think you can replace that. Certainly not behind a computer screen."

Students such as Kennedy Holler and Gianna Checchia also had the chance to show their appreciation.

Holler said, "They've put a lot of things in their life out of their way just so they can teach us."

Checchia said, "When I'm in class it just actually makes me feel like I can learn better."

Principal Dr. Jones said her staff deserves to be thanked 100 times for all of their work, and she has so much pride seeing everyone come together during a difficult time.

Jones said, "They've learned so much in a short amount of time. We're actually doing synchronize learning so they are teaching students in a virtual way and in person at the same time."

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**AROUND THE WEB**



## Principal welcomes new principal

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...s begins her new  
St. John's Regional  
July 1.

A long-time Catholic educator and leader begins her new role Wednesday as principal of St. John Regional Catholic School.

Annette Marie Jones takes over for Karen Smith, who retired recently after 15 years as principal of the school.

Jones is originally from Indianapolis and has held various positions throughout the field of Catholic education. She has been both a teacher and administrator

at Catholic schools and most recently worked as the Assistant Director for School Leadership at the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA).

**St. John's Regional principal retires after 15 years**

She moved to Maryland in 2015 to begin her work with NCEA.

In March, she completed her doctorate in Educational Administration and Supervision from Ball State University and began looking for a new role.

Jones said St. John — a private, Catholic primary and secondary school for pre-K through 8th grade students in Frederick — seemed like a good fit not only because of its standards of excellence — it holds two National Blue Ribbon Awards — but also because of the



community it serves.

"As I was going through the process, so many people had mentioned the community and family atmosphere. If I was selecting a school for my own children, [St. John is] the type of school I would want them in," Jones said.

Jones said she has been preparing for her new role since she was first interviewed and hopes to spend the first few months listening and learning.

Her vision for the school overall is to keep it balanced.

"I want to ensure that there's strong spirituality and excellence in academics and strong leadership and governance models in place to advance the school...and then you know having strong finance, facilities, and investing in the people who are in the school," Jones said.

Jones is entering her new role during an uncertain time — students aren't sure if they will return to school in the fall — and the reality of what a return could look like is still largely unknown.

Jones said she will rely on direction from the Archdiocese, but ultimately, the students and their school experience will always be her main focus and one of her favorite parts of the job.

"Working with students and seeing their growth and development...that process of growth is really rewarding to me," Jones said.

She is excited about both the rewarding and challenging aspects of entering a new school because she believes that "no two Catholic communities are the same," and she wants families and students to know that she will always be striving for interaction and communication.

"Sometimes the vision of a principal is, 'Oh, she sits in her office and does paperwork,' but that is not the case. The priority is building relationships and being among the students," Jones said.



## Andrew Stetser, C'22, Shares St. John Regional Catholic Internship Insights



"The kids always ask: 'Where's Mr. Stetser? Is he going to teach us today?' He has the best positive attitude," said Julie Pessagno who teaches seventh and eighth grade social studies at St. John Regional Catholic School in Frederick.

When junior Andrew Stetser isn't throwing on the Mount's DI track and field team, he's pursuing his secondary education with social studies major. Every Tuesday and Thursday, since mid-February, he brings enthusiasm to Pessagno's seventh and eighth grade classes as he completes his Internship I requirements.

"I had so many great teachers in high school (Gloucester Catholic High School) and I wanted to be just like them," he said when asked what inspired him to teach social studies. "I wanted to have my own students and teach the class the way they taught me—with knowledge and a passion for history."

Stetser is the third Mount intern Pessagno has had. "The students love having him. He just knew the right things to do. He comes to school on time, has a big smile and a great attitude. Andy is conscientious about getting his lesson plans done and he's professional," she said. Even St. John's principal Annette Jones, Ph.D., inquired about his graduation status. "He's a junior. We can't have him yet," Pessagno joked.

Kidding aside, the Mount has a presence at St. John's. Peggy Frazier, who teaches PreK-8 music, earned her degree in psychology from the Mount. Michael Fairley, technology coordinator, earned his master's degree in teaching from the university. Alexandra Kusznir, who teaches seventh and

education from the Mount. Ellen Santucci, who teaches kindergarten, earned her master's degree in education from the Mount in 2021, who is finishing her degree from the Mount, is already teaching fourth grade at St. John's, where she also interned. Her first stop was down the hallway from Pessagno's.

Success with Mount St. Mary's is important to us. The Mount is providing us with our future leaders, so we want our interns to be successful. When they succeed, we succeed," Pessagno said.

Stetser will complete his internship mid-May and is already learning how to teach a hybrid classroom. "I'm grateful St. John's gave me the opportunity to do my internship with them, especially with my great mentor teacher. She's fantastic and has taught me so much; I can't wait to learn more from her," he said.

Pessagno, who has been teaching at St. John's for a decade, says effective teachers have to be hardworking individuals. She tells her students: "You can do this" nearly every day. Her effervescent personality is contagious—and it's easy to imagine the excitement she brings to subjects like the American Civil War, the Crusades and Joan of Arc. "Social studies is the best thing to teach. Mr. Stetser and I are in total agreement about that."

In honor of his own classroom influences, Stetser says he is considering going back to teach at his high school in Gloucester City, New Jersey, or he might teach for the Department of Defense in the education sector where he can travel around the world and teach at military bases. He also is weighing graduate school. For now, he is focused "on a lot of very good kids and their success."