

# MOUNTAINS

## Which schools districts are going fully remote

**Brian Gordon** Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

When Gov. Roy Cooper announced his school reopening plan on July 14, he gave school districts a choice: Start the school year with a mix of classroom instruction and remote learning, called Plan B, or go fully remote. Each day, more districts and charter schools are picking the second option and postponing all in-person learning under a Plan C reopening.

As of Friday, at least 38 districts have decided to begin the 2020-21 school year on Plan C. Several had initially announced blended reopenings before pivoting to the more restrictive option. Other districts are mulling their own restarts with upcoming board meetings ahead of the first day of school on August 17.

The all-remote districts represent a diverse cross-section of the state: spanning size, political affiliation, and the urban-rural divide. North Carolina's largest district (Wake) and one of its smallest (Tyrrell) will both start under Plan C. Liberal-leaning Asheville and its more rural, conservative-leaning neighbor, Henderson County, each chose remote-only lessons through at least mid-September.

"It's really all over the place," said Leanne E. Winner, director of governmental relations at the NC School Board Association. Winner, who has been tracking the reopening decisions of all 115 school districts in the state, noted a cluster of remote-only districts around the Research Triangle.

So far, more than 570,000 K-12 students attend districts that will exclusively start with virtual lessons and take-home materials, which adds up to around 40% of total district enrollment.



As of July 24, at least 38 NC school districts are bringing back students with all remote lessons. JOHN BOYLE/CITIZEN TIMES

### 'This was the hardest decision'

With a daughter entering 3rd grade, Brian Feeley of Alamance County would've cherished the academic and socio-emotional benefits of in-person instruction. Plus, a Plan B hybrid-model would mean fewer days that he and his wife would need to balance child care.

Yet as both a father and vice president of the Alamance-Burlington School System Board, Feeley couldn't see students entering classrooms safely this August. In a 6 to 1 board decision Thursday morning, Alamance-Burlington voted for Plan C, reversing the Plan B opening it had announced the previous week.

"This was the hardest decision I've ever had to make as a board member," he said. "In all of the listening and thinking about this decision, you're left with the conclusion that there really is no good solution forward in (Plan) B or C. Both are imperfect in a variety of ways. But for me, given where our county and our

community are with certain health data, I felt it was the prudent thing to do."

In Alamance County, new reported COVID-19 cases total between 20 and 40 a day according to the county health department.

Feeley said the school board received "an extraordinary amount of feedback," from residents sharing their range of opinions on how to begin lessons in the 22,000-student district.

The district plans to remain under Plan C for the first nine weeks and monitor local health data when deciding what comes next.

### No hurricane

Onslow County Schools Board Chair Pamela Thomas said if the state had allowed it, she would've pushed for a full return to the classroom.

Onslow County Schools is of comparable size to Alamance-Burlington, yet while the latter district voted almost unanimously for an all-remote opening,

every member of Onslow's school board voted to have in-person instruction. Under its Plan B, Onslow students will rotate through two days of classroom lessons each week, with virtual lessons the other three days.

"We felt like that we had enough input that we could make a better decision with what was going to satisfy the public," Thomas said. "We're looking forward to being able to later on adjust the schedule so that we can have five days of instruction face to face."

Thomas said local educators backed the Plan B model, though staff in other parts of the state have resisted plans to start the year in classrooms. When the Asheville City Schools Association of Educators recently asked more than 300 staff if they'd feel safe working under Plan B, 80% responded they wouldn't.

For Onslow families wary of in-person instruction, the district is offering a virtual academy option. According to the district, 5,000 students have already enrolled. Multiple districts statewide have offered virtual academies, where students can enroll for a semester or year.

Thomas, a career educator, said she's never experienced anything like planning hybrid schedules and curriculums amid a pandemic.

"I mean, we've had snow days and hurricanes, but this is different," she said. "This is something that you can't necessarily see all of the devastation that might have occurred like you do during a hurricane."

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## Park Superintendent Cash launches Hikes for Healing



**Word from The Smokies**  
Francis Figart

In late May, as Great Smoky Mountains National Park began to resume operations after being fully closed for 46 days, a shock wave rang out around the world when George Floyd was tragically killed in Minneapolis.

Socially distancing and working from home due to COVID-19, the public tuned in to racial injustice as it had not done since the 1960s. With the ensuing mass protests and continued violence ushering in a social revolution of global proportions, this new recognition of racism's true face began to take a different shape in each community.

Profoundly affected by these events, GSMNP Superintendent Cassius Cash intuitively decided to take positive action for his own park and its local communities. In early June, he asked park partner Great Smoky Mountains Association to support him in creating Smokies Hikes for Healing. Through this initiative, he is inviting people of all races to hit the park trails with him to have difficult discussions about racism, social justice, and how to grow during this time of profound change.

"There is a new chapter being written in this country's history, but we can't tell the story yet because it's still being written," said Cash. "What do you do in the meantime? Well, for me, the answer is: put your own identity into it to help write the story."

Smokies Hikes for Healing utilizes Great Smoky Mountains National Park as a place of sanctuary for eight guided



Superintendent Cassius Cash is shown here with participants in the Hike 100 program from 2016. Groups participating in this year's Smokies Hikes for Healing will follow guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including social distancing and wearing of facial coverings when the appropriate distance cannot be maintained. COURTESY OF NATIONAL PARKS SERVICE

hikes over several months. Ten independent individuals from Tennessee and North Carolina communities around the park will be selected for each experience.

During the hikes, a dynamic facilitator will lead groups in a thought-provoking discussion around race by first establishing an environment that is trusting, bold, and safe for individuals to recognize the long-standing ills associated with racism and how these have carried over into today's society.

Cash is well-known locally as the first African American superintendent in the Smokies. But many do not know that Cash's father was a police officer in Memphis. Given that connection and his professional role, Cash said he feels compelled to get involved in current events.

"My parents tell me how they were involved in civil rights in the '60s and, unfortunately, some of the stories they tell me are being repeated today," Cash said. "I want to be able to tell my kids and my grandkids about my own involvement in effecting change. I'm priv-

ileged to have a larger platform than my parents did, and so I am standing on their shoulders and using this role to have more of an impact."

The overall objective of Smokies Hikes for Healing is to create a series of cohorts where crucial conversations about race will occur in one of the most diverse ecosystems in the world. It is Cash's vision that the selected participants, who start the hike as strangers, will create a unique bond from the experience that will then lead to continued conversations about the change that is needed within themselves and within their communities to combat racism.

"I like to say, if I have left it better than when I found it, then I have done my job. But that doesn't just apply to my workplace, it's also about my community," Cash said. "Addressing these issues and looking at how our communities can make changes or be a part of change, I think that is the job I'm here to do."

Smokies Hikes for Healing facilitators will equip participants with tools and ideas about how to make unbiased choices and how to practice antiracism

in all aspects of their lives. Cash believes that these choices require ongoing self-awareness and self-reflection, neither of which is easy, but both of which are necessary in order to make a better world.

Cash said he truly believes in this quote from one of his friends, who is a motivational speaker: "If you want something you've never had, do something you've never done." He added, "Smokies Hikes for Healing is not in the traditional mold or shape of what a traditional superintendent of a big park would do. But there is nothing traditional about the times we are in. This is an unprecedented moment, and I feel like I am in the right place at the right time."

Those who are interested in applying to participate in SHFH can find information at smokieshikesforhealing.org and at hashtags #smokieshikesforhealing and #SHFH. As part of the SHFH experience, the park will create a digital platform where participants can share their stories, realizations, and commitments to inspire others to be a part of the journey in their own way.

"I don't know yet what is going to come out of Smokies Hikes for Healing," said Cash. "But I do know you are not growing as a leader if you are always comfortable. I'm going into it very humbly, and I'm trusting that it will allow me to grow as an individual and allow our communities in both Tennessee and North Carolina to grow through some tough conversations."

*Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org.*

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