

I run marathons. Marathons take grit, stamina, and perseverance. Many aspects of COVID-19 have been compared to a marathon. I do not run with hurdles. The process of re-opening schools during the COVID-19 epidemic is comparable to clearing hurdles. There are many layers and factors, and the pieces and parts change frequently. In order to get traction, and run faster, there are hurdles that must be cleared.

On April 23, Governor Little released his “Rebound Idaho Plan” to begin re-opening Idaho in stages, starting on May 1. One of the aspects missing from this order was schools. During the press conference Gov. Little said there was nothing in his plan to prevent school from re-opening, and he re-directed the press to the Idaho State Board of Education’s guidelines for re-opening.

On May 4, the Idaho State Board of Education updated its guidelines to state that local districts should work with their local health departments on re-opening plans. Part of these plans require cleaning and disinfecting protocols, plans for vulnerable staff and students, and plans if a COVID-19 case is confirmed in the schools. As private schools, Idaho Catholic schools are not regulated by the Idaho State Board of Education, but we do consider what they are asking of the public schools and try to meet or exceed their guidance.

Bishop Kelly High School, in Boise, was the first Idaho Catholic school to submit a plan to Central District Health requesting to open in order to serve those students who are struggling with distance learning. Bishop Kelly opened on six (not consecutive) days for students who were struggling. Before opening, they created a plan that detailed how students would enter and leave the building, as well as how they would be spaced while they were in the school. The plan also outlined cleaning protocols and a plan if there was an identified case of COVID-19 in the building. Central District Health Department issued them a letter of authorization before they moved forward with their plan.

St. John Bosco Academy, in Cottonwood, also made plans to open its doors to its junior high and high school students for the last two weeks of the school year. They worked with Public Health Idaho North Central District in order to get a letter of endorsement for their plan. St. John Bosco Academy has small class sizes and was able to bring back all junior high and high school students while maintaining the guidelines for social distancing.

Sacred Heart (Boise) and Sts. Peter and Paul (Grangeville) are also planning the return of small groups of students to campus, and Holy Family, in Coeur d’Alene, and Holy Spirit, in Pocatello are considering options. All Idaho Catholic schools want to help their students succeed, and they know that face time with school employees can help with that effort.

These are not easy decisions. One of the factors is how much time is left in the school year. Many Idaho Catholic schools end their school year before Memorial Day, May 25. Another factor is how willing parents are to send their children to school. Another factor is the health of the staff and the students.

All of the schools are working within the Rebound Idaho guidelines to plan celebrations for graduations and First Communions. Many are planning to have families come in to return textbooks and computers and pick up remaining school supplies.

Now that the 2019-20 school year is ending, Idaho Catholic schools are setting our sights on “being ready for fall.” There are several unknowns regarding next school year, and Idaho Catholic schools want to be prepared to safely teach students faith and academics. Over the summer, teachers will receive professional development on how to teach effectively online, in case that is necessary during the next school year. Teachers will also have more time to reflect on this school year and adjust. The schools will be planning different scenarios in which to serve students. All of the Catholic schools in Idaho are enrolling for the fall, and they look forward to an opportunity to serve you and your family.