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**REGENTS/BESE MEET JOINTLY AS SCHOOLS REOPEN  
STATEWIDE**

**BATON ROUGE, La.** – The state’s top education boards met jointly today, receiving updates on the reopening of schools across Louisiana, as well as efforts to provide necessary technology to students learning remotely. Members of the Louisiana Board of Regents and Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) as well as Commissioner of Higher Education Dr. Kim Hunter Reed and Superintendent of Education Dr. Cade Brumley all emphasized the tremendous work which occurred over the summer to prepare campuses for the return of students both in-person and online amid continued COVID-19 concerns.

Regents reports 11 public and private campuses statewide welcoming students back this week and next through hybrid learning, including Nicholls State University, Grambling State University, Centenary College, Southern University A&M, Southern University New Orleans, Southern University Shreveport, Southern University Law Center, Tulane Law School, Baton Rouge Community College, River Parishes Community College and Delgado Community College.

Commissioner Reed noted that institutions’ start dates continue through August 24<sup>th</sup>, with several campuses completing the semester before Thanksgiving or transitioning to 100% online after that holiday to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during trips home. Leading up to this week’s return to campus, Regents hosted two days of emergency planning exercises, with support from the Governor’s Office of Homeland Security, designed to pressure test safety protocols and allow the 300 participants to practice responding to campus COVID-19 outbreak scenarios.

“Whether it’s down the bayou at Nicholls or on the bluff at Southern, our colleges and universities are stressing to students and faculty the important role they play in returning to campus safely,” said Reed. “We must be vigilant in following the safety protocols because we know with COVID-19 in every community across our state, this will be the only way to minimize the on-campus spread of the virus. Our institutions are committed to keeping education moving forward safely through hybrid learning this fall.”

The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) shared that 27 systems have welcomed

students back for the new school year. The learning environments vary from parish to parish, with systems offering traditional, hybrid and distance education. LDOE is collaborating with the Louisiana Department of Health to provide continually updated resources and guidance to schools as they reopen. Along with health and safety concerns, LDOE is also focused on helping systems address unfinished learning from the 2019-2020 school year and set the foundation for continuous learning in 2020-2021.

“Our most important work has been centered on ensuring a strong start to this school year for our educators and families,” said Brumley. “Our systems are showing their dedication to educating children whether buildings are open or closed. Louisiana schools are no stranger to responding in a crisis, but this will be a school year unlike any other. We will all need grace and patience, but I’m confident in the ability of our educators, students and families to rise to this challenge.”

In addition to reopening updates, Reed and Brumley also briefed the boards on efforts to eliminate Louisiana’s digital divide given the large number of students learning remotely this fall.

Using \$5 million in Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funds, over the summer postsecondary education trained more than 3,300 students, faculty and staff in both digital literacy and delivery of online courses and provided devices and internet access to students across the state in need of technology supports. Earlier this summer, Regents also partnered with the Division of Administration to distribute 1,200 new laptops to college campuses to support efforts to erase the digital divide.

“College students persisted during the spring when we shifted to online course delivery, but we know it wasn’t easy,” said Commissioner Reed. “While only 3% of enrolled students withdrew, which was about 900 more than last year, now is not the time for anyone to defer their dreams because they lack a laptop or internet access. Students must have the tools they need to be successful in this remote learning environment. We know education is the lifeline to restarting our economy and finding the scientific solutions needed to end this pandemic,” Reed emphasized.

The Department of Education distributed to schools \$316 million in CARES Act funding, which could be used for devices and internet connectivity to further efforts to ensure every child has the technology needed to be successful. Based on a recent survey conducted by LDOE, around 80% of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) said their student-device ratio was 1:1 or greater. Nearly all LEAs have surveyed families on internet access. Those system results showed the median percentage of families who did not have access to the internet in their homes was 25%.

“COVID-19 has forced more students and teachers than ever before into online learning. It also highlighted how foundational a device and high-speed internet are to the success of our students,” said Dr. Brumley. “Connecting every child to the internet can no longer be a future goal; it’s a gap we have to close immediately.”

By law, Regents and BESE are required to meet jointly twice a year to discuss education policy, share information and vote on issues of mutual interest.

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